

# **“If my daughter runs away, I will drink poison”**

(In)dividual honour and the gendered nature of child marriage in southern Rajasthan, India

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<b>Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract</b>  Child marriage is a practice that exists in all the states of India despite efforts by the government and non-governmental organisations to discourage and outlaw it. This thesis is a study about cultural meanings of Hindu child marriage in India's southern Rajasthani block of Bijoliyā. The fieldwork was done in 2012 in 28 villages of Bijoliyā Block during a period of three months. The data consists of semi-structured interviews, informal discussions and observations. Primarily, this thesis is a holistic analysis about the local perceptions and practices relating to child marriage with the aim to make the custom intelligible. My thesis examines the constitution of child marriage in an intersection of relationships pertaining to caste, kinship, gender, economy, politics and religion. The purpose is not only to explain how child marriage is multiply constituted but also to show how the intersecting relationships themselves are locally constructed, naturalised and differentiated.  Theoretically, this is a study about personhood and relatedness in northwest India. Personhood is examined through the indigenous concepts of 'honour', 'shame' and 'merit' and analysed in the framework of child marriage. Carsten's theory of relatedness, Marriott and Inden's concept of the inherently moral dividual person as well as the notion, advocated by Busby and Daniel, of permeable or malleable persons, among others, guide my analysis of the informants' constant preoccupations with honour and shame that are connected to female behaviour. The idea of an active, meaning-producing subject fashioned by discourse runs through this thesis. Mines's theory of civic, contextualised individuality is applied in an effort to examine the interaction between private individuality and the interests of the social group. The concept of 'merit' is analysed in the context of mass child weddings. It is shown how marrying off premenarcheal girls is a way to transform economic resources into spiritual assets, and thus, to enhance one's civic individuality both in this life and the next.  In this study, it is suggested that North Indian persons are malleable (in)dividuals. They are individuals in the world, and as such, their attributes and behaviour are always judged and valued socially. As (in)dividuals, they are agents of their own destinies entangled in the webs of social relationships. It is argued that child marriage is one of the means to regulate transactions between inherently moral malleable persons. Child marriage upholds both individual and group honour and is in concordance with the principles advocated by the political Hindu nationalist organisation <i>Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevak Sangh</i> (RSS) that has a strong hold in the Bijoliyā Block.			
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The International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) system is used in this thesis for the transliteration of Hindi and Mewari languages. There are some deviations from the IAST standard in the romanisation of nasal vowels and in the case of *nuqtās*, which appear mostly in Persian loanwords. Proper names of people, bigger cities and states appear in their usual English forms.

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## chapter one | INTRODUCTION

Lakṣmi, 16, and her husband Rakesh are the first Indians who legally got their child marriage annulled. The couple had been made to tie the knot in their infancy. Lakṣmi only came to find out about the marriage when her in-laws demanded her to move in with them. Her brother, Hanuman, told her that she had been married off in 1996 with the consent of her family's elders. According to the *gaunā* tradition of Rajasthan, girls are married off in their childhood, but conjugal marriage life is not consummated before they reach their teens. This is when they are sent to live with their in-laws. Lakṣmi sought help from a non-governmental organisation, and by virtue of the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2006, she was granted divorce from her husband who agreed to revoke the marriage. (The Times of India, 23rd April 2012; The Times of India, 25th April 2012; Helsingin Sanomat, 26th April 2012)

Like Lakṣmi and Rakesh, many girls and boys around the world are married off before the minimum legal age for marriage. Marrying off girls is most common in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF 2001, 2). According to a UNICEF (2007) report 45 percent of South Asian women aged 20–24 have got married when under the legal age of 18 years. Compared to other developing countries, the average age of marriage in India is one of the lowest. The majority of girls and women marry between ages 14 and 25, with a particularly tight clustering in ages 17–19. Hence, there is far less dispersion in the age for marriage than observed in other societies. (Desai & Andrist 2012, 675) Child marriage exists in all the states of India, the practice being most common in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Haryana (Ghosh 2011, 203). In Rajasthan, the auspicious day of *Akṣaya Tṛtīyā*, also known as *Ākhā Tīj*, has become infamous for the mass solemnisation of marriages between children. A small proportion of the children are under the age ten. (UNICEF 2001, 2)

My thesis aims to analyse cultural meanings of Hindu child marriage in the *tahsīl* ('block') of Bijolīyā in southern Rajasthan, India. Primarily, it is a holistic study about the local perceptions and practices relating to child marriage. Why is child marriage practiced and what kind of values does the custom both reflect and produce? The main task of my thesis is to investigate the multiple constitution of child marriage in an

intersection of unequalising relationships pertaining to caste, kinship, gender, sexuality, economy, politics and religion. How does the practice of child marriage illuminate the local social relationships? Secondly, my thesis is an analysis about personhood and relatedness in northwest India. This is the major theoretical underpinning. Personhood is examined through indigenous perceptions of honour (*izzat*<sup>1</sup>), shame (*śarm*<sup>2</sup>) and merit (*punya*<sup>3</sup>) and analysed in the framework of child marriage. How can the study of child marriage contribute to the anthropological discussion about personhood and relatedness? What does it mean that Indian persons are both 'dividuals' and 'individuals' at the same time? How does this become visible in the context of child marriage perceptions and practices in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā?

I will begin by taking a look at different legal discourses on early marriage and specify what is meant by the concept 'child marriage' in this thesis. I will then briefly look into previous studies on child marriage in India and present my research questions. Chapter two is devoted to ethical and practical considerations – in this context I will also introduce my data. In chapter three, I focus on the theoretical approaches and central analytical concepts: *personhood*, *relatedness* and *agency*. Previous studies on kinship and personhood in India are discussed in an effort to form a general theoretical framework for the following chapters. Chapter four focuses on the specificities of the field and creates a socio-political background for the study.

In chapter five I will move on to analyse the gendered nature of honour through arranged marriage, *nātā prathā* – or what I call "arranged divorce" – and the female custom of veiling one's head. From the point of view of personhood, this chapter focuses on the formations of relatedness inside the *jāti* and the patriline. The notion of fluid, malleable persons is significant in this context. In chapter six, preoccupations with *izzat* and *śarm* are investigated in relation to child marriage, and different, overlapping systems of hierarchy are discussed. The importance of both locality-based relatedness

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary translates the word *izzat* [A. 'izza: P. 'izzat] as honour, good name, esteem (McGregor 1993, 104).

<sup>2</sup> *Śarm* [P. śarm] 1. shame. 2. bashfulness; embarrassment. 3. modesty. (McGregor 1993, 945)

<sup>3</sup> *Punya* [S.]: 1. adj. auspicious. 2. virtuous, meritorious (an act). 3. holy, sacred (an observance, a duty, a place). 4. pleasing (as a deity to devotees). 5. m. moral or spiritual merit; virtue. 6. virtuous act. 7. welfare (of the individual); happiness. 8. good fortune. (McGregor 1993, 636)

and matrilineal kinship is highlighted. Interaction between private individuality and the interests of the social group is the theoretical guideline of this chapter.

Chapter seven continues the investigation of North Indian personhood from a different angle; in this chapter I examine exchange and its role in articulating relationships between people. Marriage prestations – dowry, the gift of a virgin, and bride price – are analysed in the context of child marriage. Implications of the resurgence of bride price for child marriage and the status of women are discussed. People's perceptions on mass weddings of children during the holy day of *Ākhā Tīj* are analysed, and finally the concept of *punya*, 'merit', is discussed in the context of child marriage. What does it mean that child marriage accumulates *punya*, and what does this tell us about Indian (in)dividuals?

### **1.1 Legal perspectives on child marriage**

In this chapter I will look into different judicial discourses on child marriage. I will first summarize what is meant by child marriage in human rights discourses and in the Constitution of India. After that I will briefly look into what the Hindu Marriage Act and the law of *dharma* have to say about it. In the following chapters the reader will learn that people in my research area do not define child marriage according to the official legal premise of the government – the marriage age has been fixed at 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys through the strengthening of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1978.

Even though early marriage has many forms, one thing is crucial according to UNICEF: whether child marriage concerns a boy or a girl, it is a violation against human rights. The right to a free and full consent of marriage is recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Consent is not considered "free and full" if at least one partner is immature. (UNICEF 2001, 2) There are several other human rights contracts that protect children from early marriage. The 1979 Convention of Eradication of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, among

others, call for free and full consent of both marriage partners and a marriage age of at least 18 years.

Child marriage is objected for several reasons. The practice affects negatively children's education, health, security and freedom of choice. It ensures that girls accept their roles in the household and conjugal life already in their childhood. This means that they are unable to decide about their sexual and reproductive health. (Ghosh 2011, 199–200) Consequently, it extends the reproductive span of women contributing to large family sizes. Moreover, early pregnancy constitutes a threat to the survival and the future health of mother and child. (UNICEF 2001, 2) Early marriage is a custom that impacts girls in a larger scale and with more intensity, since it often limits their personal freedom and closes down opportunities. For boys, child marriage is less likely to be physically harmful or exploitative. (UNICEF 2001, 4)

In India the efforts to legally control child marriage began in the 1880s when a campaign was launched to raise the age of consent for the offence of rape<sup>4</sup> from 10 to 12 years under Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code. The debate led to the establishment of two committees investigating child marriage issues. Reports written by these committees eventually resulted in the enactment of The Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929. The minimum marriage age was fixed at 14 years for girls and at 18 years for boys. In 1949 the minimum age was raised to 15 years for girls. The year 1978 saw a substantial raise in marriageable age: 18 years for girls and 21 for boys. However, the act did not declare child marriage illegal or invalid *per se*. Violation of the act led to a maximum of three months in prison, and/or to a fee of 1 000 Indian rupees for the groom, his guardian or whoever had committed the violation. The main purpose behind these simple punishments was to prevent people from organising child marriages. Hence, the 1929 amendment did not deal with the status of marriage or rights of the partners after the marriage ceremony. (Ghosh 2011, 201) The inefficiency of this law in "restricting" child marriages led to the implementation of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) in 2006. The law came into effect on 11 January 2007. A significant legal change introduced by the PCMA concerned the possibility to declare child marriage void within two years of attaining legal adulthood. (The Law

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<sup>4</sup> Sexual relations involving a child below the age of consent are considered as a statutory rape.



Commission of India, 2008) This act allowed the annulment of the above-mentioned Lakṣmi's and Rakesh's marriage. Ghosh (2011, 203) has criticised the act for leaning to stereotyped gender roles and patriarchalism: it does not prohibit the cohabitation of a child bride and her husband, it ignores the residence of the child bride should her husband make a petition, and it prescribes different ages for marriage according to gender. Thus, it defines "child" differently than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The equality principle contained in the Constitution of India is in conflict with the personal laws of Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Christians on the one hand, and with the law of *dharma* on the other. Religious personal laws govern family relations such as marriage, divorce, maintenance and adoption. In these laws, women have fewer rights than men in equivalent situations (Aura 2008, 19). When it comes to child marriage, the Muslim personal law, for example, allows a marriage of two 15-year-olds on the grounds that they are supposed to have attained puberty. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, in contrast, states that the bridegroom has to have completed the age of 21 and the bride the age of 18 at the time of the wedding, and is thus in accordance with the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1978.

Hinduism is not an organised, canonised religion like Christianity and Islam. Diverse religious beliefs and practices characterise Hinduism. Neither does it have a single holy text or book, nor do the Hindus recognise a common religious leader or leaders. However, what is common for most Hindus is that their lives are guided by the principle of *dharma*. (Tenhunen & Säävälä 2012, 25) *Dharma* is a moral law which maintains both the universe and the societal order. The societal content of *dharma* is defined in *dharmaśāstras*, ancient Hindu law books written by Brahmins<sup>5</sup>. To fulfil his societal duties, a man must strive towards all the three aims of human life: *dharma* ('law', 'justice'), *artha* (gaining wealth) and *kāma* (pleasure of the senses). (Parpola, Koskikallio & Hämeen-Anttila 2005, 119) All these three principles are subservient to *mokṣa*, spiritual liberation (Mees 1980, 26). The law of *dharma* does not operate on equality but instead: "[r]ights and obligations are seen relative to position in the social order, and position in the social order is transcendently defined. [...] Social category,

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<sup>5</sup> Brahmins are the highest caste and they are in charge of religious rules, speech and prayers (Tenhunen & Säävälä 2012, 34).

whether ritually characterized as in caste Hinduism or ethically so as in merit Buddhism, represents a sorting of groups and individuals into natural classes according to the rules they naturally live by. Status is substance”. (Geertz 1993 [1983], 198) In other words, a person’s *dharma* depends on “birth, gender and stage of life” (Tenhunen & Säävälä 2012, 25). The law of *dharma* that advocates the inherent inequality of persons is in sharp contrast with the equality principle of the Constitution and human rights discourses.

I define child marriage as a marriage between partners that are under the minimum legal age for marriage according to the Constitution of India – i.e., the bride is under 18 years and the groom is under 21 years at the moment of the solemnisation of marriage. In the following chapters I will present local views about what is a suitable life phase for marriage and see how these opinions relate to the discourses presented here. I will demonstrate how perceptions of a proper time for marriage are based on factors other than age. My key aim is to shed light on why, despite legal measures and efforts by non-governmental organisations, the practice of child marriage is still very much alive in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā.

## **1.2 Eradication of the “social evil”**

Next, I will relate my research aims to previous studies on child marriage in the fields of medical, demographical and social sciences. A majority of the current research focuses on negative consequences of child marriage, especially on how the practice threatens girls’ health (e.g. Raj, Saggurti, Balaiah & Silverman 2009; Hampton 2010). Premchand Dommaraju (2009) approaches the subject from a different angle: his article is a quantitative analysis on the relationship between schooling and marriage at the district level. He comes to the conclusion that although individual women with higher levels of schooling may marry later, schooling has no influence at the aggregate level. According to Dommaraju, marriage age in India has been increasing irrespective of changes in the schooling. Contrary to Dommaraju, Zahangir & Kamal (2011) are of the opinion that female education is the key mechanism to control child marriage. They focus on how certain socio-economic, cultural and environmental factors relate to child marriage. Their analysis is based on the data of the 2004 Bangladesh Demographic and Health

Survey (BDHS). The authors identify certain background characteristics and show the percentage distribution of females' age of marriage with respect to these characteristics. From an anthropological point of view, their statistical analysis does not succeed in giving a holistic picture of child marriage – it is certainly not what Geertz would call "thick description".

The qualitative analysis of Gangoli, McCarry and Razak (2009) is focused on the links between arranged marriage and forced marriage among South-Asian communities in North East England. Their study addresses the perceptions, experiences and effects of child marriage and takes into account the gendered nature of the practice. Intentionally, they do not directly address the role of social class in understanding differences or similarities between marriages (Gangoli et al., 418).

Biswajit Ghosh's (2011) article is the most interesting for my approach. In her article, Ghosh analyses the perceptions of a rural community in West Bengal's Malda District in the context of legal reform and shows that despite legal interventions, no reduction can be seen in the incidence of child marriage. The aim of Ghosh's article is "to explore social policy to prevent this social evil" (ibid, 199). According to Ghosh, child marriage thrives as a result of a combination of traditional and modern factors, the main reason being the coerciveness of patriarchal values and institutions. A lack of awareness cannot explain the continuance of this custom, as people practice child marriage with full awareness of its illegality. Ghosh (ibid., 217–218) suggests that adolescent girls have the potential to act as key agents of change. Through empowerment and gaining knowledge of girls' rights, these girls could challenge the authority of their parents.

In my thesis I try to avoid expressing moral judgments on the matter. Although my purpose is not to come up with ways to put an end to this "social evil", but rather to make child marriage comprehensible, Ghosh's article has contributed significantly to my research. Having read her article before going to the field enabled me to pay attention to many important factors right from the start. It facilitated the beginning of my fieldwork, because it enabled me to sketch some preliminary themes on which to base my questions and observations. Of course, regional varieties had to be taken into consideration – child marriage practices vary significantly across the Subcontinent.

### 1.3 Research questions

The aim of my thesis is to explore child marriage in the rural area of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā through three main questions: 1) Why is child marriage practiced in this specific time and place? 2) How are unequal social relations pertaining to gender, caste, kinship, religion, politics and economy constructed, naturalised and differentiated in local practices and perceptions of child marriage? 3) How can the analysis of child marriage practices and perceptions contribute to the anthropological study of Indian personhood and relatedness?

The ethnographical purpose of my study is to provide a thorough account of the contextually specific practice of child marriage. My aim is to make child marriage intelligible – to investigate its cultural meanings through perceptions and practices of the villagers. Why is child marriage still practiced? Why are girls married off earlier than boys? What kinds of values does child marriage reflect, and how are these values represented by behaviour and oral accounts? I explore how different inequalities are constructed, naturalised and differentiated. More specifically, I aim to analyse how child marriage is constituted in an intersection of unequalising relationships based on caste, kinship, gender, economy, politics and religion, and how these discourses are themselves separated and made to appear logical. How do people construct, strengthen, negotiate and challenge the discourses pertaining to social relationships in their perceptions of child marriage?

The third question is the major theoretical underpinning of my thesis. My analysis builds on previous anthropological studies on personhood and relatedness in India, and I aim to investigate the instances of personhood illuminated in the context of child marriage. How can research of child marriage contribute to the anthropological understanding of personhood? What does it mean to say that Indian persons are 'malleable' and that they are both 'dividuals' and 'individuals' at the same time?

I embarked on this study with an assumption that child marriage is a relic of history. I naively believed that child marriage is on the verge of disappearing as modernisation progresses in India, but this assumption proved far too straightforward as the fieldwork

gained ground. Child marriage is a much more complex phenomenon than simply an echo of the past.

## **chapter two | METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES**

### **2.1 Studying child marriage – ethical and practical considerations**

The data was collected while I was working for an Indian non-governmental organisation called Bal Rashmi Society, which is based in Jaipur, Rajasthan. This non-political and non-profit-making organisation was founded in Jaipur by Alice Garg on Children's Day, 14 November 1972, with the motto "Save Children Save Generation". The organisation is involved in "child and woman empowerment, awareness, training and capacity building of rural community, better shelter, income generation, water harvesting activities and upliftment activities in the district of Jaipur, Tonk, Dausa and Sawai-Madhopur in Rajasthan". (Bal Rashmi Society 10.1.2011) Since 2010, the organisation has also been active in the district of Bhīlvārā in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā and in the adjacent *tahsīl* Mandalgarh.

The fieldwork was done during a period of three months. My fiancé – who was teaching English in two primary schools – and I lived above Bal Rashmi Society's rural office in a small town called Bijoliyā in the Rajasthani *jilā* ('district') of Bhīlvārā. In the field, I had a double role as a researcher on the one hand, and as a worker of Bal Rashmi Society on the other. My job was to collect information about the reasons of child marriage and the knowledge of women concerning their own as well as children's legal rights. At the same time I gathered data for my own research. Local people found my dual role confusing. Local Bal Rashmi workers and I explained to them that the information will be used for research purposes only, and that no authorities are involved. It was difficult for the people to understand why someone would be interested in their marriage practices – they suspected that I had a hidden agenda. Oftentimes informants thought that I was a police officer or that I was collecting information about their "wrong-doings" only to later report them to the government. However, because of

my role as a worker of Bal Rashmi, it was easier to gain their confidence. Bal Rashmi Society was widely known in the area – it is, in fact, the only NGO currently present in *tahsīl* Bijolīyā – and people’s attitudes towards it were mostly positive. The organisation had, for example, built artificial lakes for rainwater harvesting and it currently ran an interest-free microloan programme for poor rural women. I had five different assistants altogether; all local women and employees of Bal Rashmi Society. As I was always accompanied by one of these local women in the field, most people felt that I could be trusted. When we reached the destination of the day, one of Bal Rashmi’s *sahayognīs* (female facilitators) from that particular village joined us. Her role was to provide a link between the villagers and us. I am certain that without the organisation it would have required a lot more time for me to do this sort of research. To be fair, I must admit that in some villages it would have been virtually impossible.

The fact that my fiancé was with me in *tahsīl* Bijolīyā for two months further helped me get access to people’s lives. I think I was considered an ”honourable” woman because of him. People respected him for teaching poor children in two public schools, and I believe that this contributed positively to my research, as well. During interviews people were always keen to talk about Niklas and his work. His reputation had spread over quite a large area – I noticed it when teachers of a village school situated about 50 kilometres from where Niklas taught asked me to tell him to come and teach in their school, too! As his ”wife” I was considered a trustworthy person. I assume that my status would have been a lot lower had I been in Bijolīyā on my own as a young, foreign woman without a male companion.

Bal Rashmi Society, just like Ghosh (2011), defines child marriage as a ”social evil”, but as a researcher I do not adopt this view. In conducting the fieldwork I tried to be as neutral as possible and emphasised that I am not judging the informants for their views on child marriage. As the field work progressed, I became increasingly sensitive to their worries and it all started to make sense. The ethnographic purpose of this study is not to paint a picture of ”suffering victims” of child marriage in southern Rajasthan, but to make the practice, as well as the conditions leading to it, intelligible to people unfamiliar with them.

To ensure the privacy of my informants, their names have been changed. Their consent was asked for and they had the possibility to stop the interview whenever they felt like it. Some women did, in fact, finish the interview prematurely due to fear or lack of time. Consent was also asked for recording the interviews and group discussions. There were 5 to 17 discussion participants in the latter ones. In some of the group discussions it was challenging to keep track of the number of participants, because people were coming and going and the deliberations usually lasted for more than an hour. Naturally, not everyone's understanding of and consent for recording the information could be ensured in cases when participants kept changing. The recorder was kept so that everyone could see it and I counted on people to inform each other about the objectives of the research. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out, even when operating in an overt manner, it is rare for ethnographers to be able to tell everyone everything about the research.

## **2.2 Methods and materials**

My data consists of 126 individual interviews, 10 group discussions with women, observations written in two field diaries, and informal discussions with teachers, villagers, social workers and employees of Bal Rashmi Society. I did not have a possibility to witness actual weddings, since the wedding season had passed just a couple of months before the beginning of my fieldwork. Thus, my observation mostly concerned the relationships between different status groups, such as husband and wife, brother and sister, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, father-in-law and daughter-in-law, members of different castes, neighbours and habitants of neighbouring villages. Observations were made constantly when visiting villages – during both working hours and free time. I also had the chance to attend two training programmes of teenaged girls, where they were taught about the consequences of child marriage among other things. A majority of the data was, however, collected through interviews and discussions, and I admit that other kinds of methods might have accumulated different kinds of information. My aim was to investigate *perceptions*, in particular, and for this reasons I feel that using interviews as a primary method was justifiable. Also, a research based on the observation of "natural" situations would have required a lot more time in the field.

My research area includes 28 villages<sup>6</sup> of *tahsil* Bijoliyā in the state of Rajasthan in northwest India (see maps on p.3). All the villages were situated within about 40 kilometres from the headquarters of the area, the town of Bijoliyā where I resided. Some villages were visited several times, some only once. The most time was spent in the villages of Makreṛī and Rānājī kā Guṛhā, where I visited eight to ten times. My fieldwork was not a typical ethnographical fieldwork since I could not stay in one location for a long time, get to know the people or observe their everyday life. This is a limitation that I acknowledge.

Of the people interviewed, 102 were women and 24 were men. All but 15 of the women were illiterate. Of the men, 11 were illiterate. The illiteracy percentage was remarkably high among the Bhīl and Scheduled Caste (SC)<sup>7</sup> women. Of the 47 Bhīl women interviewed only two had studied – one of them had reached Year Three, while the other had got up to Year Five. Of the ten SC women aged from 18 to +55 years none had ever gone to school. Among the Dhakaṛ there were a few women who had studied up to Year Ten or even Year Twelve. All women were married and all but one man, who was physically disabled, were married.

The interviews lasted from approximately 20 minutes to one hour and the informants belonged to 18 different castes altogether,<sup>8</sup> the vast majority – 60 people – being members of the Bhīl community. It was my employer's wish that half of the people interviewed would be Bhīl, since they are the most deprived population of the area. In addition to this, caste Hindus tend to attribute child marriage to the *ādivāsī*<sup>9</sup> Bhīl, even though according to Majhi (2010, 48) it is not traditionally part of their culture. Among

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<sup>6</sup> The villages are Berisal, Bherūpurā, Bhutī, Calu kā Duna, Choṭa Thorota, Choṭī Bijoliyā, Dānpurā, Devnagar, Fatahpur, Ganeśpura, Hemniwas, Indrapura, Kadbaṛā, Kālīghatī, Kāma, Khaṛipur, Makreṛī, Māṇḍayaraṛī, Māngaṛh, Nim kā Kheṛā, Nolaṛī kā Copra, Purohitō ka Kheṛa, Rānājī ka Guṛhā, Resundā, Sadārāmṛī kā Kheṛā, Satkuṛiya, Sundā, and Ummedrāmṛī kā Kheṛā.

<sup>7</sup> The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are groups of historically disadvantaged people recognised by the Constitution of India. They are commonly known as *dalits* or Untouchables (SCs) and *ādivāsī* (STs). The Bhīl are classified as an ST group.

<sup>8</sup> The castes of the interviewed informants were Balāī (2), Banjārā (18), Bhatt (3), Bhīl (60), Brahman (1), Camār (1), Darogā (2), Dhakaṛ (6), Gosvām (a Brahman subcaste) (4), Gudāliyā Lohār (1), Gujar (3), Khaṭīk (1), Lohār (2), Mīna (5), Prajāpat (7), Rājput (2), Raigar (7) and Telī (1).

<sup>9</sup> Culturally diverse *ādivāsī* groups, which fall outside the caste system, were labelled as "tribals" by the British. *Ādivāsīs* are settled mainly in the northeast and in the hilly regions of central India. (Tenhunen & Säävälä 2012, 33)



other things, I hoped to find out whether or not it is actually the case that child marriage is most common in the Bhīl *samāj* ('community').

The selection of interviewees was done quite randomly. I drove a scooter or motorbike with my assistant to a village in the morning, asked around and interviewed whoever was willing and had time. During the daytime the villages were usually relatively quiet and there were mostly women present. Sometimes the women were busy doing their household chores and sometimes they were just relaxing in their courtyards or chatting with neighbours. This was an ideal situation for me. All the interviews were conducted in people's homes, courtyards or communal places along the village path. More often than not, several people would gather around us to listen and discuss. Sometimes these discussions and the ways in which people behaved during them provided useful data, as well. I have been trying my best to put all the interviews in their context, taking into account the audience and the location. Only a few of the interviews have been recorded, because the informants and my assistants felt uncomfortable with the recorder. This is understandable – people have been arrested and fined for having taken part in arranging a child marriage. My note-taking was also frowned upon by some people, but once we explained that it is done for me to be able to remember what they have said – in other words, for me to not distort the data – they agreed.

Group discussions of women were conducted in ten villages. The discussions were not limited to child marriage but were based on eight broad themes: (1) the position of daughters, (2) the position of married women, (3) the economic participation of women, (4) the political participation of women, (5) divorce and remarriage, (6) polygyny, (7) the position of widows, and (8) rituals and beliefs concerning women. Through these discussions I hoped to get a wider picture of the local women's lives. These discussions were for my own research purposes only. Men were present at two discussions, and all meetings but one were arranged in the local *anganvādis*: child-care and mother-care centres sponsored by the government. The discussions were held during the last weeks of my fieldwork. Hence, they provided an opportunity to revise the data already collected and to rethink unclear issues. In addition, these meetings turned out to be fruitful situations for observing communicative practices – hierarchical relations between women could be abstracted from them.

All the interviews and group discussions were done in the local dialect of Mewari. Since I had been studying Hindi actively for a couple of years, I could follow parts of the conversation – Mewari is closely related to Hindi. Only one of my translators spoke some words in English, so they usually translated the parts of the conversation I did not understand into Hindi instead of English. Some of the interviewees were able to speak Hindi, which facilitated the process. Towards the end of my fieldwork I began to understand more and more Mewari. This, too, saved time and got a very positive response among the informants. Even so, it must be admitted that there is a risk of misunderstandings and distorted information. I tried to minimise the risk by testing the data in different contexts and by discussing the findings with the field coordinator of Bal Rashmi Society, who speaks fluent English. Occasionally he, too, accompanied me in the field. In fact, four of the group discussions were conducted with him.

Data collection and analysis was done in dialectical interaction. I feel that this way I could dig deeper and deeper into the phenomenon of child marriage. Previous studies, especially the ideas developed by Ghosh (2011) in her recent article, were relied on in the beginning of the fieldwork. I used the results of Ghosh's analysis to sketch a preliminary list of possible questions and things to pay attention to. These were, of course, open to constant modification and even complete rejection, but these preliminary themes, nevertheless, helped me direct my attention to certain ideas right from the beginning. This saved both time and energy and hopefully gave the informants an impression that I have at least some sort of understanding of what child marriage is about. I assume that this, in turn, encouraged them to tell me more about the subject.

In the course of the fieldwork, new themes kept coming to light as old ones proved to be inapplicable in this particular cultural environment. Data collected each day was read closely, and little by little analytical concepts started to emerge. The concepts I used were both "spontaneous" ones brought up by the informants themselves and "observer-identified": concepts developed by me that are based on previous literature and personal reflection on informants' ideas (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983, 163). After coding the data to analytical categories (which required several re-readings) I began to direct my attention into the categories most relevant to my analysis, working out their relations with other categories (ibid., 165). This led to the formation of a few central themes on which this thesis concentrates. Unavoidably, different kinds of methods and theoretical

perspectives would have brought forth different research results. My perspective on the phenomenon of child marriage is only one among many possible ones. I do not claim to present an all-around theory of child marriage that is irrespective of time and location.

## **chapter three | THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND CONCEPTS**

### **3.1 Kinship as relatedness**

The anthropological study of kinship has been a subject of heavy debate throughout its existence. Kinship and its relation to other domains of culture is one of the theoretical underpinnings of my thesis. Like Schneider (1980 [1968]) I argue that there can be no kinship theory apart from cultural theory. In order to conceptualise kinship, it is necessary to first locate me as a researcher in the continuum of anthropological kinship studies by having a brief look into the history of the subject matter.

Maine (1816) explained the development of societies as movement from status to contract. The earliest form of the family, according to Maine, was the 'patriarchal family', which was based on the principle of 'agnation': descent through males. Morgan (1997 [1870]), in turn, collected kinship terms and contrasted two types of groups: 'descriptive' terms, characteristic of the speakers of Aryan, Semitic and Uralian languages, and 'classificatory' terms, which are representative of, e.g., Dravidian kinship (Aura 2006, 8; Uberoi 1994, 13). Rivers continued the study of South Indian kinship in his detailed ethnography *The Todas* (1906). He came up with what he called 'the genealogical method of anthropological inquiry'. Rivers collected genealogies in order to manifest the principles of social organisation of the Todas. (Rivers 1906, according to Uberoi 1994, 13) Lévi-Strauss' *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969, French 1949) presented the 'alliance theory'. According to Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo and other marriage rules exist in order to create solidarity among men. Women, on the other hand, are left with the part of exchanged objects.

In Tharakan's (2006, 321) view, of all the anthropologists that have studied Dravidian kinship terminology, Dumont (1983), whose work followed that of Lévi-Strauss, has given the most satisfactory account. Tharakan (ibid.) describes how Dumont sees the categorical opposition of consanguines and affines as essential to understanding the Dravidian kinship system. Through cross-cousin marriage, the alliance relation is passed on from generation to another. Fruzzetti, Östör and Barnett (1992, 9) explain how, in Dumont's view, kinship relations in northern India are encompassed by the caste system, whereas in the South principles of alliance and equality are needed in order to explain kin relations. Fruzzetti, Östör and Barnett (1992) have compared Bengali and Tamil forms of marriage and descent. They build their analysis upon Dumont's work while recognising the limits of all-India comparative efforts. Following Fruzzetti et al., there are many similarities between the two regions at the level of structural principles; the principle of alliance is "applicable to both regions in terms of the indigenous construction of the person". There is no justification to oppose caste to kinship on the level of structure. Instead, the two should be considered as "units of hierarchy and equivalence in a single whole". (Fruzzetti et al. 1992, 29–30) In a Schneiderian spirit, Fruzzetti, Östör and Barnett reject the assumption of genealogical primacy in kinship studies and build their article on a careful analysis of indigenous conceptions on the construction of person through blood, relationships and marriage.

According to Carsten, Schneider has a pivotal role in the history of the anthropological study of kinship. This is because Schneider combined the tradition focused on the structure and functions and the tradition that analysed the culture-specific meanings of kinship. (Carsten 2004, 18) Collier and Yanagisako (1987, 30) write how Schneider argued that to anthropologists, kinship has always been about relationships based on sexual reproduction. He criticised anthropology for taking biology for granted and presuming cultural bonds upon it. Schneider's writings on American kinship emphasised the cultural meaning of kinship and the importance of the natives' own categories. He distinguished 'the order of nature' from 'the order of law'. In Schneider's view, the key symbol of American kinship is sexual reproduction. The system of kinship consists of relationship as natural substance (which, in American culture, is blood) and relationship as code for conduct (which is based on 'enduring diffuse solidarity', i.e. love). (Schneider 1980 [1968]) Schneider's cultural analysis is the basis for my conceptualisation of kinship. In my thesis I am not interested in the analysis of

kinship terminologies but rather in indigenous statements and practices – the cultural meanings of kinship. Unlike Schneider, however, I do not think that it is possible to “understand culture in its own terms”. I agree with Daniel (1984, 54–55; 227) that anthropologising is only possible because a certain distance exists between the native’s own categories and those of the anthropologist. Thus, he suggests that we should understand a culture *for* its own terms. This does not exclude the possibility of understanding certain aspects of the culture *in* its own terms at times, but simply admits that one’s own symbolic constructs cannot be completely set aside.

In the 1970s and 1980s as the state of the anthropological study of kinship looked worn out, studies of gender and person seemed to take over some of its domain. In the late 1980s, with the rise of symbolic anthropology, studies of gender and personhood began to contribute to the study of kinship reformulating its basic principles. (Carsten 2004, 20–21) Carsten (ibid., 4) suggests “a move away from a pre-given analytic opposition between the biological and the social on which much anthropological study of kinship has rested”, and in doing so, introduces the concept of ‘relatedness’. I locate my analysis in this “post-Schneiderian comparative study of relatedness” (Carsten 2000, 14). In the footsteps of Aura (2008), Busby (1997; 2000), Carsten (1995; 2000; 2004), Lamb (2000), and Lambert (1997; 2000), among others, I intend to discuss kinship in processual terms: how persons are formed in relation to others. Like Lambert (1997; 2000) I take into account the locally valued forms of relatedness outside intra-caste affinal and agnatic relations – the domain of ‘relatedness’ thus comprises an area larger than what is conventionally understood by ‘kinship’. By using the term ‘relatedness’ instead of ‘kinship’ I aim to explicitly make clear that I am not attributing genealogical content to the term. Instead, I am interested in different indigenous domains of *being related* – be it genealogical or not. In other words, my interests lie in the cultural meanings of relatedness. The notion of ‘fluid personhood’ will guide my approach.

### **3.2 Fluid personhood**

In his modern classic *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and Its Implications*, Dumont (1980 [1966]) analyses hierarchy as a principle according to which parts are organised in relation to the whole. He calls this principle “encompassing the contrary”.

In Dumont's view, caste and person are in an encompassing/encompassed relationship in India, i.e. a person is subordinate to caste. He contrasts this "collective idea of man" with Western individualism, the conception of an autonomous bounded subject. According to Strathern, an individual of the Western culture is seen as morally self-contained. A Western individual is set in opposition to both nature and society. The notions of personhood in social science that oppose "the individual" to "society" are best understood as being based on this Western conception. However, the ideas of personhood in other cultures should not be conflated with this specific ideological construct of person in Western culture. (Strathern 1981, 168–169) Strathern's analysis of Melanesian ideas of person, gender and agency brings under scrutiny many taken-for-granted ideas about the nature of social life in Western orthodoxy. She criticises the idea of an antinomy between society and individual, which conceives society as an ordering and classifying force that brings autonomous individuals together. She argues that a view of individuals as "conceptually distinct from the relations that bring them together" is not adequate for the analysis of Melanesian social life. (Strathern 1988, 12–13) Instead, she suggests a view on sociality that conceives it in both the singular and the plural:

Far from being regarded as unique entities, Melanesian persons are as dividentally as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalised sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationship that produced them. The singular person can be imagined as a social microcosm.

(Ibid., 13)

[T]he body is a social microcosm *to the extent* that it takes a singular form. This form presents an image of an entity both as a whole and as holistic for it contains within it diverse and plural relations. The holistic body is composed in reference to these relationships, which are in turn dependent for their visibility on it.

(Ibid., 15, original italics)

Western individualism implies a natural proprietorship of persons. Western persons own their minds and bodies, and subjects are conceptualised as exercising power over the objects at their disposal. These include their personal capabilities, such as sexuality, which should be deployed through the will of the possessor. The capabilities of persons and the resources of society are seen as "things" that have intrinsic natural or utilitarian value. (Strathern 1988, 135) I agree with Strathern (ibid.) and Fowler (2004, 53) that

this kind of conception is not useful when analysing personhood outside the commodity economy. People do not universally own their bodies, work, objects or land. The task here, then, is to construct an analytical understanding of personhood in India without relying on the "objective" antinomy of individual and society or the individual ownership implied by Western individualism. Strathern's analysis of Melanesian persons as "social microcosms" effectively demonstrates how people are composites of different relations, but her model cannot be applied to North India in an unproblematic way. In order to better understand the culture-specific configuration of personhood, I will now examine some ethnographic studies concentrating on South Asia.

Marriott and Inden's ethnosociological model dating to the 1970s was the first theory to focus on the fluidity of persons in India. Marriott and Inden (1977) saw persons as malleable entities, as unbounded 'dividuals' that are constantly sharing and exchanging substances with each other. The term 'substance', in their usage, refers to "that which passes between bodies" (ibid., 235). Applying Schneider's distinction of 'law' and 'nature', Marriott and Inden argue that no separation between "moral" and "natural" things is insisted in South Asia – bodies are conceived as being inherently moral (ibid., 231). What passes between bodies is thus both moral qualities and bodily substance, or what Marriott and Inden call 'code-substance' or 'substance-code'. In social interaction the values of substances vary according to the status of those who produce and exchange them. As the substances pass, they are often raised or lowered in value (ibid., 234–235). Marriott (1989) contrasts in a similar vein to Dumont the understanding of unbounded, permeable persons with the American and European conception of person as closed and indivisible. Nevertheless, these perceptions end up denying the existence of an individual in South Asia altogether.

Daniel's (1984) analysis of Tamil personhood supports Marriott and Inden's idea of dividuality. Daniel describes how all things consist of fluid substances and are thus able to mix and separate. According to Lambert (2000, 101), Daniel is one of the few anthropologists who have taken into account the idea of substance shared through a common microcosmos such as a village, a house or land. In my analysis, this kind of locality-based shared substance is important in relation to maintaining the village honour, which will be discussed in chapter five. Busby (2000) extends the ethnosociological perspective to gender, arguing that there are limits to fluidity. She

shows how, in a South Indian fishing community, gender is seen as a fixed attribute at the core of the person – men and women are seen as different kinds of persons due to their gender. (Busby 2000, 21) By substantialisation of gender she refers to the fact that gender is not first and foremost a bodily difference but an ability to transact in a certain, gendered way and to pass on gendered substances. Re-evaluation of bodily gender is needed if one does not succeed in transacting according to one's physical attributes. (Busby 1997, 266–267) Commenting on Strathern's analysis of Melanesian partible personhood, Busby argues that the understanding of personhood as partible does not apply in South India:

For South Indian persons are not totally separate, bounded individuals, but engage with others and are connected to them through flows of substance which they exchange with each other. Such substances, however, always refer to the persons from whom they originated: they are manifestations of persons rather than of the relationships which they create.

(Busby 1997, 273)

According to Busby, the difference between Melanesian and South Indian personhood is that whereas Melanesian persons are internally divided 'microcosms of relationships' that have body parts which can be identified as male or female, the South Indians are complete in themselves and are classified as male or female "according to the evidence of gendered capacity given by the genitals". The boundaries of their bodies are conceived permeable, and it is the flows of substances that connect South Indians to each other. (Busby 1997, 274–275)

In his analysis of Maharashtrian construction of personhood, Carter (1992) approaches personhood as an office. Personhood is not something inborn or equivalent to the individual soul of the person. Instead, it is something that can be achieved by the performance of *saṃskāras*: life-cycle rituals (Carter 1992, 132). It is through marriage that persons enter into full personhood; that they become fully situated in the world of kinship and caste, where they strive to pursue the ends of their personal existence: *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* (ibid., 139–140). Carter states that although a person "is a responsible office holder who may be expected to maintain his own *dharma* (*svadharma*), he is not an autonomous individual". Instead, the persons are subordinated



to the hierarchical, holistic order of caste and kinship – their *varṇa*<sup>10</sup> defines their *dharma*. (ibid., 141–142) In other words, the possession of a particular position in the holistic hierarchy of caste and kinship defines the possible rank of one’s personhood.

McHugh (1988, 77) justifiably points out that even though the individual is not valorised, it does not necessarily follow that there is no conception of individual whatsoever in South Asia. Following him and other anthropologists who have criticised the juxtaposition of “Western” and “non-Western” conceptions about personhood, e.g. Aura (2008), Lamb (2000), Mines (1994), and Rasmussen (2008), I intend to approach personhood from a perspective that does not rule out the existence of the notion of a decision-making subject. The notion of conscious self-awareness or reflexive agency does not require the person to be a self-sustained indivisible being but simply acknowledges that the person may have different features that emerge under certain circumstances (Fowler 2004, 16). In his analysis of Tamil individuality, Mines (1994, 22) distinguishes between a *private* or *interior* dimension of individuality, which is “the creative force behind agency, decision making, and direction taking”, and a *civic* or *exterior* dimension (ibid., 20). Tamil individuality, he argues, is defined both in terms of the private self and in terms of the person’s social position and behaviour:

Individuals are distinguished by their actions precisely because they see themselves and are seen by others as responsible for them. It is this dual perception of responsibility, a person’s own awareness of responsibility and society’s judgment of the execution of these responsibilities, that joins private and civic expression of individuality, the twin facets of a Tamil’s sense of self.

(Mines 1994, 20)

In Tamil culture, persons exhibiting the most important traits of individuality, such as honour, modesty and trustworthiness, are known as good persons as opposed to ordinary or bad persons (ibid., 19). Mines talks about ‘contextualised individuality’ which means that the individuality of persons is judged and valued “within the context

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<sup>10</sup> According to Hindu religious thinking, the cosmic order (*varṇa dharma*) divides the world into four categories organised hierarchically according to the principles of purity and pollution. The highest *varṇa* are Brahmans, followed by Kṣatriyas (warriors), Vaiśyas (merchants), and Śūdras (labourers). Only Brahmans are labelled by their *varṇa* title. The others are called by their local *jāti* names. A *jāti* group’s hierarchical standing is determined in relation to the *varṇa* hierarchy but may vary according to the location. (Tenhunen & Säävälä 2012, 34) Untouchables or *dalits*, on the other hand, fall outside the *varṇa* system, but they belong to various *jātis* (Eriksen 2004, 192). The same is applied to *ādivāsīs* in Bijolijā: the Bhīl community was referred to as one *jāti* among others.

of groups where they are known and within which they have a known set of statuses and roles”. These contexts include the household, kin and caste community. (Ibid., 21)

‘Individuality of inequality’ is another important distinguishing feature of Tamil individuality. Contrary to the West, the Tamil individuality does not recognise the notion of equality between independent agents. Individuality is always graded by a person’s status within the context of groups. (Ibid., 22) Therefore, to judge another person’s individuality, one must know who that person is within a given context:

The value of a Tamil’s individuality is a variable thing distinguished by several mutable features: ancestral home, *jati*, or caste, family reputation, status within groups, age, control and responsibility for others, size of following, and the sense others have of one’s character. What is being estimated is the importance and nature of person and his or her agency.

(Mines 1994, 150)

Busby has called for a sharpening of terms used for the analysis of personhood. The term ‘dividual’ has been used to characterise both Indians and Melanesians in contrast to Western ‘individual’, although there are significant differences between the respective indigenous conceptions. (Busby 1997, 276) Nevertheless, in this analysis I have chosen not to abandon the notion of dividuals altogether, because to my mind the concept successfully captures the relational nature of Indian personhood. I do not claim that my usage of the term can be applied outside India. In addition, I also use the idea of fluid, permeable persons as a metaphor in order to understand the practices and perceptions associated with child marriage in North India. In fact, I argue that the ethnosociological understanding of South Asian permeable bodies engaging with each other through the flows of ‘code-substances’ is essential to understanding the cultural meaning of child marriage. I am not claiming that it represents the way my informants or Indians more generally think about themselves (cf. McHugh 1988, 76). I will build my analysis on the notion of contextualised, unequal individuals who, nonetheless, express a self-reflective agency (Mines 1994).

### 3.3 Power, inequality and agency

Bourdieu's theory of practice intertwines around the concepts of habitus, field and capital. Habitus is created by interplay between structures and free will – it consists of dispositions that at the same time are shaped by structures, contribute to shaping the current practices and structures, and condition our perceptions of these (Bourdieu 1984, 170). Yanagisako and Collier (1987, 42–43) follow Bourdieu in asking how people, through their own actions, realise the structures of inequality. Bourdieu does not recognise the possibility to change one's habitus, and this is what Fruzzetti and Tenhunen (2006, xii–xiii) criticise him for: "he problematically does not acknowledge the heterogeneity of actors and their interests, gives no examples on the discursive change, nor does he address the question on the connections between the two modes of practice: individual practices and discursive change".

Structures and codes of conduct are not timeless and immutable; rather they are prone to change and resistance. While some women explicitly contest the cultural hierarchies based on gender, others can *choose* to act according to the prevalent code of conduct. Nevertheless, actions tend to have unforeseen outcomes that are beyond the actors' intention. (Ibid., xiii–xiv, my italics) Fruzzetti and Tenhunen describe the relationship between agency and power as follows: "the concept of agency reveals the origins of action and the notion of power the actors' differing abilities to reach their goals" (ibid., xix).

Nita Kumar (2006) shows how women in the neighbourhood of Assi in Banaras, despite exercising agency in limited ways by public standards, feel powerful in their own world, the world of home. Through this example, Kumar calls for better theorising of agency. In this research I intend to take into account the power disparities between different groups without ignoring the agency of the actors, especially that of the "oppressed victims" of child marriage. Like Jeffery and Jeffery (1994), I will pay attention to how the structures in which women are located are not merely a question of power. Instead, "[t]he notion of agency is bound up with what people want to do and ideas about that relate not only to their assessment of what they can do but of what they *ought* to do. Women themselves may be crucial actors in reinforcing the normative limits to autonomy in other women." (Jeffery & Jeffery 1994, 161, original italics) Keeping this

in mind, my aim is to analyse different forms of agency – to show how the women themselves, through their actions and perceptions, (1) realise the gender-based code of conduct, (2) directly challenge the structures and (3) deploy forms of 'everyday resistance' (ibid., 160). In other words, how do the women manipulate some aspects of the system in ways that do not overtly confront the structures? The challenge is to analyse subjects moulded by discourse without making them passive recipients of it:

The whole spectrum of protest, from daily 'private' acts and intentionally ambiguous language to elaborate myths and execution of violent oppositional deeds, should be seen as part of the same structure of power as that which creates the dominant discourse. Because we know that power is not located at any one level but diffused throughout the system, because power is never unilaterally exercised, both parties to its exercise constitute it and respond to it.

(Kumar 1994, 21)

Analysis of gender cannot be independent of analyses of social wholes (Collier & Rosaldo 1981, 318), and for that reason, in addition to the gender-based code of conduct, I am interested in how naturalisation of other inequalities becomes visible in the actions and perceptions of people. According to Yanagisako & Delaney (1995, 10–11), Schneider's (1964, 1968, 1972, 1984) analysis of the folk model of biology, which underlies both anthropological theory and the prevalent North American understanding of kinship, forms the backbone for research that links ideologies of the "natural" to systems of inequality. Feminist anthropologists have been influential in their efforts to situate natural identities within structures of inequality. How exactly hierarchies of status and power are embedded in symbolic systems can only be investigated through contextually specific cultural practices. The important question to ask is not only how different inequalities, such as sexuality, race, nationality, ethnicity and religion are made to appear logical and rational, but how the distinctiveness of these inequalities from gender is naturalised. This leads us to investigate "how culturally-specific domains have been dialectically formed and transformed in relation with other cultural domains, how meaning migrates across domain boundaries, and how specific actions are multiply constituted". (Yanagisako & Delaney 1995, 10–11)

In this thesis I aim to investigate how the custom of child marriage is constituted in an *intersection* of cultural domains. The concept of intersectionality was originally developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) in order to analyse multiple systems of

oppression. The interest towards intersectionality rose from critique towards the research of gender and race that did not succeed in capturing lived experiences of people in certain points of intersection (McCall 2005, 1780). In this research I am interested in the complex intersections of gender and other 'unequal social relations' (Walby, Armstrong & Strid 2012, 231). The aim is to investigate the 'mutual shaping' (ibid.) of relations. As Whitehead (1995, 147–148) reminds us, we cannot assume that others' cultural domains are organised like ours. Careful attention needs to be paid to "local patterns of meanings-in-practice" (Yanagisako & Delaney 1995, 14). Thus, my aim is to investigate a) how people think and act at the intersections of unequal social relationships, and b) how unequal social relations pertaining to gender, caste, kinship, religion, politics and economy are constructed, naturalised and differentiated in people's perceptions and actions. In trying to find answers to these questions, the idea of active, meaning-producing subjects fashioned by discourse is substantive.

## chapter four | THE FIELD

*Tahsīl*<sup>11</sup> Bijoliyā is located in a hilly region in the Bhīlvārā District (Hindi: *Bhīlvārā jilā*) of Rajasthan, northwest India. The *tahsīl* is named by its headquarters, the town of Bijoliyā. Bijoliyā town is not a tourist attraction and foreigners rarely go there – for this reason, my fiancé and I attracted a lot of attention with our pale faces, funny habits and my blonde hair. Each morning, on the way to the nearby milk shop, we were greeted with children's joyful cries ("Angrezi, Angrezi!" meaning 'Englishmen, Englishmen!') and curious, impudent stares. During the monsoon season, when Niklas lost his balance on the slippery marble floor of our flat and hit his head, gossip about a motorcycle accident began to circulate the village. We lived in a former Scheduled Caste (SC) neighbourhood that is nowadays inhabited by people from diverse backgrounds. Our neighbours included an affluent Bengali doctor who was in an inter-caste marriage, a meat-eating Lohar family, two rich Jain families living strictly according to the *ahimsā* ('nonviolence') principle, and a nomad scavenger (Mehtar) community settled in three

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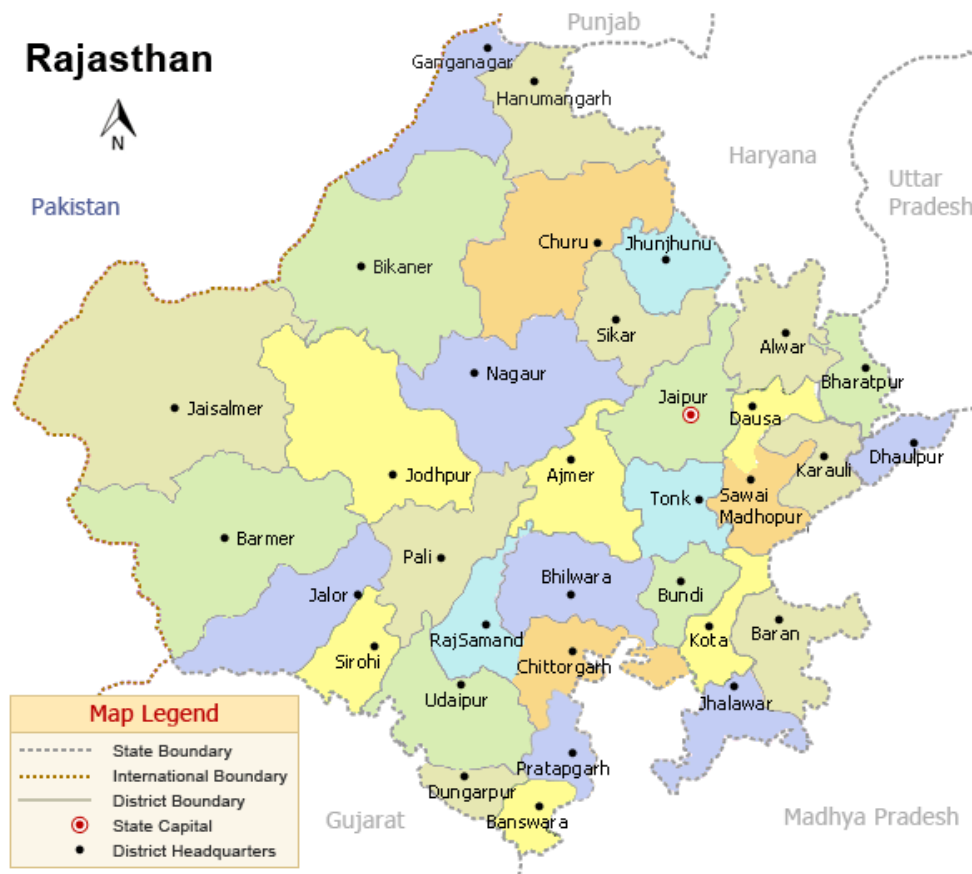
<sup>11</sup> *Tahsīl* is an administrative division, which generally has a city or town as its headquarters. Bhīlvārā District is divided into seven sub-divisions under which there are 15 *tahsīls*.

temporary tents in front of our house. The daughters of the Mehtar community were often employed for household chores by the Jains and others who could afford extra help. Life in the neighbourhood seemed quite harmonious, but occasionally there were disputes concerning leftovers of meat that stank on the street or the defecation habits of the Mehtars: they did not have any toilet facilities, so they defecated openly behind a small fence.

The town of Bijoliyā consisted of a central market place, living neighbourhoods, some of which were divided on class or caste base (there were separate hamlets for the upper class in the proximity of the centre and for the tribal Bhīl on the outskirts of the town), Jain and Hindu temples and a dried-up lake. The lake filled up with water quickly during the monsoon season and functioned as a 24-hour communal spa for water buffaloes, stray dogs and wild pigs. According to the Census of India, the population of Bijoliyā town was 12 384, of which 6 402 were males and 5 982 were females (Census of India 2001a). The town of Bijoliyā is situated by the Būndi-Chittaurgarh highway: it is 50 kilometres away from Būndi, the administrative headquarters of Būndi District. *Tahsīl* Bijoliyā consists of 122 villages, which are divided into 18 *panchāyats*<sup>12</sup>. It is the least developed *tahsīl* of Bhīlvār District and 90 % of its population lives in rural areas. Most inhabitants live below the Poverty Line and lack even the most basic infrastructure. (Bal Rashmi Society 2012, 4) Non-governmental organisation Bal Rashmi Society has been working on village community empowerment in the area since 2010. There are no other NGOs currently present in the area.

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<sup>12</sup> *Panchāyat* or *grām panchāyat* is a rural local government functioning on the village level. Each village with a population of 500 or more has to have a *gram panchāyat*. In smaller villages, the model of group *panchāyat* is in function. Members of the *gram panchāyat*, including the *sārpanch*, or headman, are elected by the villagers.



The location of Bhīlvārā jilā in the state of Rajasthan. (Source: Government of Rajasthan. Rajasthan Foundation. <<http://rajasthanfoundation.gov.in/rajasthan-maps.htm>>)



The location of Bijoliyā in the Bhīlvārā District.

Bijoliyā is one of the largest mining districts in Rajasthan – the quarrying area is about 61.7 km<sup>2</sup>. Extensive sandstone quarrying for roofing and flooring purposes is going on near many villages<sup>13</sup>. Mining on a large scale began nearly 40 years ago and it has had a major impact not only on the ecosystem of the area but also on the socio-economic system of the people working at quarries and their surroundings. (Sinha, Sinha & Pandey 2000, 196–197) Some villages, e.g. Sundā, have been forced to move to make way for quarrying. Nowadays the village is situated behind a large quarrying area which the children need to cross in order to get to school. According to Sinha et al. (ibid.), forest land degeneration and the development of wasteland have increased significantly. Artificial hillocks can be seen everywhere. Mine owners do not have an obligation to try to cultivate them since there are no administrative or legislative acts regarding this. Mining, drilling, blasting and transportation have increased the amount of suspended particulate matter (SPM) in the air, which has contributed negatively to the health of the mine workers. (Ibid., 198) In Mangaṛh village, for example, several men have, according to the villagers, died of tuberculosis that they got from inhaling SPM. In addition to tuberculosis, many men are unable to work because of back pain resulting from drilling and cutting stone. Alcoholism is also a common health problem among men who work in the quarries. Drunken men were not an unusual sight along village paths. I was told that many men work for a couple of days and then drink for as long as they can afford. Alcohol was, for the most part, sold in small liquor stores near the highway.

The villages are situated not more than 30 kilometres from Bijoliyā town where I resided. Most villagers were daily wage labourers at the stone quarries, farmers or agricultural labourers. Based on landholdings and political affluence, the Dhakaṛ, a community currently categorised as an Other Backward Class (OBC), were recognised as being the area's "dominant" caste. They had an own brand-new private school in the town of Bijoliyā. The school had a massive, brightly painted gate with elephant decorations on the top that was visible to the Būndi-Chittaurgaṛh highway. In fact, it is the first thing one sees of Bijoliyā when coming from the Chittaurgaṛh direction. Many Dhakaṛ men held high offices in the mining industry. Dhakaṛ women, as well as other

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<sup>13</sup> These include the villages Guṛhā, Makreṛī and Sundā which belonged to my research area.



OBC women of the area, were often housewives or worked, for example, as sewers, nurses, farmers and facilitators.

The percentage of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population is 8.97 in the Bhīlvār District. The tribal population of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā consists of the Mīna and the Bhīl, which, according to the Census of India 2001, constitute 93 % of the total ST population of Rajasthan. The literacy level of ST groups of Rajasthan is 44.6 %. At the national level, the literacy rate of the Mīna is 52.2 %, the corresponding figure being 35.2 % in the case of the Bhīl. (Census of India 2001b) This is significantly lower than the national literacy rate of all Indians, which was 64.8 % in 2001 (Census of India 2001c). The Bhīl are believed to be the oldest inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent and nowadays form the largest tribal group in the Arāvali Range of Rajasthan. In addition to Rajasthan, the Bhīl are settled in the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. (Majhi 2010, 3) The Census of India (2001b) reports that the main economic activity of the *ādivāsī* population of Rajasthan is agriculture. The Bhīl of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā did not usually own land. According to the workers of Bal Rashmi Society, Bhīls had been forced to give up their lands because of debts. Most of the Bhīl men of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā worked in the stone quarries as labourers. Women were usually agricultural labourers working in the fields of others or in a communal field shared by a few families. It seemed that Bhīl women along with SC women were often involved in daily wage labour. They were seldom housewives. In addition to agricultural labour, many of them were working in the quarries with men, usually carrying stones. Bhīls lived in seclusion in their own villages or in a separate hamlet. Traditionally, the Bhīl have lived scatteredly, each family occupying its own hut (Majhi 2010, 78), but in the present-day *tahsīl* Bijoliyā their huts or houses were aligned close to each other away from the houses of caste Hindus.

The Mīna were fewer in number and oftentimes lived among caste Hindus. Compared to the Bhīl, the Mīna were relatively affluent. Some of them were even holding valued government offices. A certain percentage of available vacancies in the public sector is reserved for the Scheduled Tribes, but since very few Bhīl have the necessary qualifications for government jobs, it is mostly the Mīna who benefit from the reservation system. In fact, it could be said that the deprivation of the Bhīl is advantageous for the Mīna due to a lack of competition for the desired jobs.

According to Majhi (2010, 184), who has studied the Bhīl of Udaipur District, the Bhīl society is currently passing a crucial transitional period in the religious sphere. Majhi describes how the group has started to worship Hindu gods and goddesses even in the most remote locations. However, they have not abandoned their animistic beliefs. Instead, Hindu gods are incorporated into their traditional religious thinking. This kind of religious syncretism seemed to be characteristic of the Bhīl of Bijoliyā, too. In Bhīl villages there were shrines for animistic deities as well as temples for Hindu gods. It can be said that Bhīls are nowadays largely "Hinduised" (Jain 2011, 83). According to Shah (2010, 28), the process of Sanskritisation is progressing in a fast pace in the villages among the middle and lower castes, *dalits* and tribals. This has provided ground for fundamental Hindu organisations to spread their activities. However, Shah (ibid.) sees Sanskritisation as a centuries-old social and cultural process that cannot be attributed solely to the recent uprising of Hindu nationalist organisations such as *Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) and *Viśva Hindū Pariṣad* (VHP). Tenhunen (2012, 237) criticises Shah for not taking into account the possibility that lower castes may seek positive identities from sources other than Sanskrit ideals. Shah does not analyse change from the actor's point of view but associates it to processes such as Westernisation, urbanisation and Sanskritisation. The Bhīl of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā were highly influenced by hierarchical caste ideals, but it did not seem like they were trying to Sanskritise themselves. Instead, their perception of themselves was based on them being 'low' (*nīce*) people. They openly ate meat and drank alcohol – actions that a puritanical Hindu might consider impure. A detrimental, backward "lifestyle", poverty and illiteracy were associated with the Bhīl. Bhīls themselves characterised their way of life by saying that there is no 'understanding' (*samajh*) in their community.

Child marriage is a very established custom in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā. According to UNICEF (2012, 162), the median age at marriage by age 25–49 years in Rajasthan is 15.1 for females and 19.0 in the case of males. According to *Rajasthan Patrika* (17.7.2012), 53.9 % of girls in the Bhīlvāṛā District get married before the legal age of marriage. In rural areas of the district the figure is 62.7 %. The percentage of boys who fall below the marriage age is even bigger (likely due to the boys' legal age for marriage being 21): in Bhīlvāṛā District 58 % of boys marry when under 21, the corresponding figure for rural settings being 65.9 %. However, these figures should be considered directional rather than conclusive, because *Rajasthan Patrika* did not mention its sources of information. I

have found no official statistics about the age of marriage on district level. Nevertheless, one could come to the conclusion that child marriage is an established custom just by walking around in the villages – teenage mothers were not an uncommon sight.

Considering the aforementioned, it is clear that *tahsīl* Bijoliyā is an ideal location for the study of child marriage. From this short description of the field one has presumably already got an impression that the quarrying industry and the caste ratio shape all the relationships of the area in a specific way. I feel that these local circumstances have to be adequately analysed in order to understand the nature of child marriage in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā. In effect, this chapter, instead of being a "neutral" description of a field, actually turned out to be a first step of interpretation. So, now that we have formed a rudimentary framework of local relationships in our minds, we are ready for the actual analysis part of this thesis.

## **chapter five | GENDERED CONCEPTIONS OF HONOUR**

Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society.

(Pitt-Rivers 1965, 21)

During the interviews and discussions, the themes most often and most fiercely addressed by the informants were the fear of elopement of children, inter-caste relationships, rape, premarital sex and love marriage. They are all in connection to the concepts of honour (*izzat* or *sammān*) and shame (*sharam*). In his analysis about honour in the Mediterranean society, Peristiany (1965, 11) writes how individuals in small-scale societies, in which relations and social personality are given a lot of importance, are constantly preoccupied with honour and shame. Needless to say, considerations of "honour" and "honourable" are dependent on time, place and culture (Pitt-Rivers 1965, 21). What makes the notion of honour interesting for my purposes is the interaction between private individuality and the interests of the social group – or as Mines (1994, 189) states more specifically:

Individuality, therefore, finds expression within the context of social groups, including the family, and identity and reputation involve an interaction between the person as a separate individual, responsible for his or her identity and actions, and the identity and reputation of groups, such as the family, which support and benefit its individual members.

In this chapter I will analyse the significance of arranged marriage, as well as perceptions of honour and shame in relation to child marriage. I will begin by looking into the meanings of arranged marriage, *gaunā* institution and the rules of avoidance between *jātis*. I will then move on to the role of women as maintainers of honour. What does it mean for a woman to be shameless? How are the norms of proper female behaviour bounded to honour? Finally, I will examine the formation of relatedness through arranged marriage and *nātā prathā* – divorce and remarriage based on common law.

### 5.1 Arranged marriage

In marrying, people "make families" but they also contract debts, change residence, stir enmities, and establish co-operative bonds.

(Collier & Rosaldo 1981, 278)

According to Uberoi (1993, 36), marriage is the critical institution of Indian society. Practically all Indians get married (Das & Dey 1998). Thus, every woman is defined as somebody's wife – be it potential, actual or former (Säävälä 2006, 151). Marriage is essential for upholding the social structure – kinship and arranged marriages are important constituents of the caste system (Tenhunen & Säävälä 2007, 53) – and it also marks a pivotal turn in the personal lives of people (Säävälä 2006, 151). According to a survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 74 percent of Indians found inter-caste marriages unacceptable (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies 2007). Traditionally, marriages are arranged by family elders: they are not contracts between individuals but between families.

The villages of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā follow the patrilineal descent pattern – one belongs to his or her father's line, patriline. The living arrangements are virilocal: after marriage, the couple will reside in the husband's natal village, usually with his parents or in the

immediate proximity of his parents' house. In my research area, as in Rajasthan more generally, it is customary that marriage is not consummated right after the wedding. Instead, a girl stays with her parents for some years, and during this time, she is not supposed to spend time with her husband. The girl moves to her in-laws only after a consummation ceremony called *gaunā*. It is the ultimate ceremony in the cycle of marriage and marks the beginning of conjugal life. When *gaunā* has been performed the couple is free to interact without restraint and live as wife and husband. The timing of *gaunā* is not fixed, but for instance in the Bhīl community it usually takes place two to three years after marriage. Nevertheless, sometimes the groom's family might want the bride to be shifted to their house earlier. In some cases in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā, *gaunā* ceremony had followed right after the other wedding procedures, even in the case of child brides. Consequently, there were women who had been transferred to their husband's household as early as in the age of five years. Sometimes this early transmission was explained by the need for an extra pair of hands in the household chores. A couple of informants also mentioned the family's inability to take care of their daughters. By marrying off girls young, a family had fewer mouths to feed. This was, however, not seen as a primary reason for child marriage.

Since a conjugal relationship is commenced only after the "second marriage", many of my informants did not consider early marriage harmful to young girls or boys. Their opinion was that early pregnancy and the health risks it poses for the mother and child is the most significant drawback of early marriage. However, according to the villagers these disadvantages can be easily prevented by late *gaunā*. *Gaunā* ensures that a girl can have a relatively long childhood in her natal home even though she is married. After the consummation ceremony it is customary that a bride remains in her husband's home for a year or so before visiting her parents in her natal village (Jacobson 1977, 265). This was common in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā, too. Some villagers said that a woman visits her parents only after giving birth to her first child.

### **Monological voices – the authority of the elders**

In Bijoliyā, there is no choice not to get married. Parents or family elders are usually responsible for finding a suitable spouse for their offspring. Chaudhary (2008, 21) points out how this kind of 'monolocality' by a person or authority is seen as good for

people, because the authority "knows better". In the case of intra-familial relationships it is often argued that it is the parents who know what is best for the children. According to Chaudhary, in India monological voices are considered reassuring and favourable in most situations. Also, since the marriage affects the status of the entire family, whether maintaining, strengthening or weakening its rank, it is considered too important a decision to leave on two persons' shoulders (Harlan & Courtright 1995, 5). It must be kept in mind that this is changing as we speak. A growing number of people do actually have a say in the choice of their future partner and so-called love marriages are increasing in popularity especially among the urban, educated upper and middle classes. Some may even choose not to marry at all. Monologicality is, however, a valid concept to describe the situation in my research area. I do not claim that it applies to contemporary – or even historical – India more generally.

The middle-aged, uneducated women I spoke to were not consulted about their marriage, but some of the informants said that nowadays some people do, in fact, ask for children's opinions regarding the selection of a marriage partner. In practice this means that they are able to see a picture of the selected spouse and express whether or not they like what they see. This was the case with one of my assistants, highly educated and now in her late twenties. Some can even meet their prospective spouse before the marriage ceremony. Small children are not, however, consulted about their marriage. The marriage will take place if the parents or the elders decide so. If a parent, a grandparent, someone from the extended family or the future father-in-law suffers from a disease or (s)he is old, children will be married off earlier. Some of the informants who had married off their children early put the blame on their affinal relatives, saying that their children's in-laws demanded early marriage because they are old. It is considered a matter of *dharam* (Hindi: *dharma*) to arrange the wedding or marriage<sup>14</sup> of one's children – after this the parents can die in peace. They do not have to wonder about "who will finance the girl's marriage later" or "who will find a suitable groom later", as Ghosh (2011, 210) remarks. These were common themes in my research material, as well.

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<sup>14</sup> Unlike English, Hindi does not make a difference between marriage and wedding. The word *śādī* signifies them both.

### Considering caste and kinship

In this study I prefer to use the indigenous concept *jāti* instead of the foreign word 'caste', which usually refers to the institution of ranked, hereditary, occupational groups. The South Asian word *jāti* refers to many other things besides what is understood by the word 'caste'. In the broadest sense *jāti* means 'species, genera'. (Marriott & Inden 1977, 230) The system known as caste system is only one of the surface manifestations of the system of variously ranked substances – the word *jāti* "is not applied to human beings only, but to animals, plants, and even inorganic material, such as metals and minerals, as well" (Daniel 1984, 2). However, 'species' or 'genus' cannot be regarded as a perfect translation of *jāti* – different categories, such as sex genera, kinship genera and occupational genera are not exclusively differentiating in a Linnaean sense but instead they intersect and interact in complex ways. These intersections of generic substances can be understood as sharing and exchanging particles across the boundaries of generic categories. (Marriott & Inden 1977, 230)

Each person is a unique composition of differently proportioned substances, and for this reason one must observe unique codes for determining what substance is the most compatible with one's essence at a particular moment in time and in a particular position in space (Daniel 1984, 71–72): "there is no *dharma* (code for conduct), no unit of time, no food or soil that is moral or good for all persons" (ibid., 70). Marriott and Inden (1977, 231) describe *jātidharma*, the inherent code of conduct pertaining to one's *jāti*, as being optative rather than absolutely limiting – it may be modified by action in time.

Conceiving the boundaries of *jāti* as "fluid" enables us to analyse transactions between different generic categories as flows of substance (Busby 1997, 276). By fluidity, I do not mean to imply that caste membership can be negotiated. Instead, what I mean to say is that sharing substances between different caste groups is controlled precisely because the boundaries of categories are conceived fluid in the same manner as persons are. Relational persons have certain sorts of qualities because of their caste status and when sharing substances with members of different castes, these qualities mix. Now, the sharing has its consequences not only for the person as an individual but for the person's whole community, because persons are encompassed in the greater order of caste. For example, if a Rājput (high caste) woman allows herself to be sexually

involved with a *dalit* (low caste) man, she debases not only her individual honour but also the honour of her family, her *jāti* and her village. It is precisely because of the fluidity of the boundaries that interactions between different *jātis* are controlled. This, to my mind, is essential for understanding created relatedness, the fear of inter-*jāti* sexual relationships and the constant preoccupations with honour, *izzat*.

As Fruzzetti (1982, 17) points out, "discussing marriage rules is in fact discussing an indigenous domain of kinship". In the villages of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā, selection of marriage partners, or as Lambert (2000, 75) puts it, "the formation of kinship", is based on *jāti*. There is little space for individual decision-making.<sup>15</sup> The hierarchy based on purity and impurity (Dumont 1980 [1966]) is maintained when a father gives away his daughter as *kanyā dān* ('the gift of a virgin') to a man from the same *jāti*. There cannot be a marriage alliance between members of two *jātis*. Another rule is that a marriage partner needs to belong to a *got* (Hindi: *gotra*) – "the maximal descent identification label from an ancestor in the male line" (Fruzzetti 1982, 15) – that is different from one's father's, mother's father's and paternal grandmother's *got*. When getting married, a woman changes her *got* to that of her husband's. Persons of the same *got* cannot marry since they are classified as consanguineal relatives, and marriage between blood-relatives is forbidden. They are thought of as sisters and brothers. As implied by the fact that one cannot marry from one's mother's *got*, consanguineal relatedness is also recognised from the mother's side. Affines can thus only be those who, at the time of marriage, are classified as "unrelated" (Lambert 2000, 75).

Since women change their *gotra*, or *got*, at the time of their marriage, it is the male children who ensure the perpetuity of the male line and the name of the family. Marriage ensures the fulfilment of a man's *dharma*. Women belonging to a different line are the only means through which men can acquire their own immortality and fulfil their *dharma* (Fruzzetti 1982, 126). In other words, men need women to produce a male progeny. Hajirat, a Bhīl man in his thirties, explained that he prefers to have sons for the reason that if there were no boys, the family's name would not continue to grow (*agar larḳā nahī hotā to parivār kā nām āge nahī barḥtā*). He continued that girls are also

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffery & Jeffery (1994) show that notions of autonomy are of questionable value to understanding rural women in North India. Greater individual choice is not necessarily seen as desirable by the women themselves.



needed, because otherwise there would be no wives for men. In his statement Hajirat acknowledged the importance of women but only in the status of wives and mothers; women are needed so that men can fulfil their *dharma*.

Ghosh (2011) is of the opinion that "where the number of prospective bridegrooms becomes rare, endogamy contributes to early marriage". In other words, if there is a shortage of women among a certain age cohort of a specific caste, suitable bridegrooms will be sought from a lower cohort. In this way, *jāti* endogamy and *gotra* exogamy can contribute to early marriage of girls, since it is customary that the groom is somewhat older than the bride. This point is discussed in more detail in the context of the theory of 'marriage squeeze' in chapter seven.

## **5.2 Veiled women and group honour**

A central theme concerning the proper female code of conduct in the classical literature and folk traditions is that men must control women and their power (*śakti*). Hindu mythology is bulging with stories about chaste wives who help their husbands in battles by behaving properly and transferring the female *śakti* to their husbands' use. (Wadley 1988, 28–29) Fruzzetti and Östör (1998, 44) discuss the position of contemporary Hindu women as follows:

The problem contemporary Hindu women face is tied to Hinduism, the cultural construction and meaning of "acceptable" women, an adherence to prescribed and unchanging male codes of conduct. Underlying these prescriptions is the sacredness and purity of women's actions contributing to the maintenance of the caste system: the continuation of the male descent lines and the fulfilment of dharma obligations.

Actions appropriate to *jāti* fortify the blood purity of the female individual and that of her descendants, as well. Therefore, it is essentially the wife's responsibility to maintain the blood purity of her husband's line. She is expected to preserve her chastity, to perform rituals that maintain household purity and to promote the well-being of her husband and his household. (Harlan & Courtright 1995, 6) According to the women that took part in the group discussions, the decision-making power over household matters usually belonged to men – either husbands or fathers-in-law. Even though many women were involved in daily wage labour, they did not have access to money without prior

consultation of their husbands. The women said that they hand over the money they earn to their husbands. However, some women expressed that they put aside small amounts of money for their personal use.

In many parts of Rajasthan, women are expected to veil their faces after marriage. The veil is known as a *ghūnghaṭ*, and I was told that a woman wears it in order to show respect for her father-in-law, other men who are senior or equal in age to her husband, and those to whom she is related by marriage. In the villages of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā, it is also common for women to veil their faces in front of older males of the same village or from the same caste as their husbands and others who are in frequent contact. Some women veil their faces in front of their mothers-in-law, as well. Wearing a *ghūnghaṭ* is not necessary when interacting with consanguineal males or males younger than one's husband. It must be pointed out that there were different levels of veiling practice. A typical outfit of a rural woman consisted of a *lehenga colī*, a long skirt and a midriff-baring blouse, and a *dupaṭṭā*, a long scarf worn over a *colī*. Usually, a *dupaṭṭā* was draped over the top of a woman's head covering her hair, and in the presence of men, she pulled it on so as to cover her face. Some women practiced a milder version of veiling. In this case the *dupaṭṭā* would have been loosely draped over one shoulder, and in the presence of men they would have lifted it over their heads in order to cover the hair and eyes. Higher caste women, such as Rājputs, usually wore a *sārī*. The loose end (*pallū*) of the garment was used to cover the head and face.

A veil clearly distinguished the young women married into the village (*bou* or *bahu*) from the daughters of the village. Perez (2006, 99), likewise, writes how *pardah*<sup>16</sup> (IAST transliteration: *pardā*) is an unmistakable feature that differentiates the two categories of women: "the daughter-in-law always covers her face before strangers or her husband's male relatives; the daughter, on the contrary, uncovers it in her father's village". In the village of Mangarh, I witnessed a situation where there were people

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<sup>16</sup> *Purdah* is a Persian word meaning 'curtain', whereas *ghūnghaṭ*, 'veil', is a Hindi word. In *tahsīl* Bijoliyā these words could be used interchangeably although the latter was more common. Jeffery points out how it is incorrect to suggest that *purdah* of Muslims and Hindus is the same phenomenon: "For Muslim women, *purdah* in the sense of complete veiling seems to operate after *puberty* in relation to all men, except very close kin. In northern India, for Hindus, *purdah* in this sense is largely a question of veiling only after *marriage* and in relation to the husband's older male kin." Jeffery adds that *purdah* entails more than just physical separation of men and women – there are many complex arrangements that maintain *social* distance, as well. (Jeffery 1979, 3, original emphasis)

sitting in three levels: the veiled *bous* sitting on the ground, daughters of the village and mothers-in-law (*sās*) on the big platform made of rocks under a sacred tree, and finally men on the chairs placed on the platform. Chairs were quickly fetched for my female assistant and me, as well.

Chowdhry (1993, 91) points out that *ghūnghaṭ* is central to what is referred to as "dehātī (rural) culture". The veil is thought to be the core that holds together the whole social fabric in rural settings. According to El Gundi (1999), veiling in North Indian villages symbolically separates the wife from her natal kin group and attaches her to that of the husband's. This is in accordance with my findings. In *tahsīl* Bijoliyā, a girl is expected to start veiling her head right after the marriage or – in the case of a very early child marriage – right after she is old enough to understand:

**Jelena:** After marriage a girl needs to wear a *ghūnghaṭ*. If she is just a small child, does she still need to wear it?

**Sapna:** If she is a small girl, she does not understand. But they make her wear it when she goes to her mother-in-law (*sās*). The in-laws (*sasurāl vāle*) make her wear it.

**Jelena:** Ok. So, when she still lives at home...

**Sapna:** It is like so that when she is very small, she does not understand and does not wear it [lit. 'she does not take it out', *vah nahī nikālegī*]. But, like, when she is 10 or 12 or 13 years and she begins to understand little by little, then she needs to wear it. Then *izzat* will not be bad. When in-laws say that you wear it for *izzat*, it is like this. Then she wears it. But in her natal village (*pihār*), in front of whom should she wear it there... If in-laws and such come, then only does she wear it.

**Jelena:** Ok, I understand.

**Sapna:** But now it has become rarer. Before, it had to be worn in front of the mother-in-law as well. Before everyone wore it [in front of the mother-in-law]. But now it is getting rarer and rarer.

**Jelena:** So nowadays everyone is not wearing a *ghūnghaṭ*?

**Sapna:** No, not everyone is wearing it. In some *jātis* it is still a custom. Like the Rājput... The Rājput and the Gujar, in the Gujar community... In these *jātis* many wear it in front of the mother-in-law as well.

**Jelena:** What about the Bhīl?

**Sapna:** Not among the Bhīl. Among the Bhīl it is so that if a man is bigger [older] than one's husband then a *ghūnghaṭ* needs to be worn in front of him. Only in front of gents. Only gents.

When I asked about people's opinions on the negative consequences of child marriage for girls, I was sometimes told that the lack of understanding about the importance of veiling was one of the downsides of early marriage. I was told that by not wearing the veil and thus acting shamelessly a girl will harm not only her own *izzat*, but also that of the natal family, the husband's family and the whole village. Hence, being shameless in this case equals to a lack of honour, a lack of respect for others' opinions on proper

behaviour. If a woman acts in a way judged disrespectful by her husband, the husband is allowed to teach her a lesson by beating: *gussā dilāte haĩ to mār sakte haĩ*, 'If she riles him, he is allowed to beat'. Most women whom I asked were of the opinion that violence is justified in case a woman makes a 'mistake' (*galtĩ*), such as wandering around with other men. Mandelbaum (1988, 22) characterises *izzat* as being both a corporate and a personal attribute. A person's behaviour is seen as a reflection of group traits, not as acts of an autonomous individual. If a woman violates her group's standards of *purdah*, it affects the *izzat* of her marital and natal family. The antithesis of *izzat* is *sharm*, which is to be avoided as diligently as *izzat* is sought.

Wearing a *ghūnghaṭ* is unnecessary when a husband and wife are alone, but if a third party enters the room, the face has to be covered in order to show that the wife respects her husband. Also, if a woman and her mother-in-law are in the company of a man, the woman needs to wear a *ghūnghaṭ*. These practices show how the relationships as wife and husband or as daughter-in-law and mother-in-law cannot be exclusive of others (Chaudhary 2008, 16). The woman needs to behave differently if a third party (male) enters the room. She makes a voiceless indication to her husband or mother-in-law that she respects her husband and his lineage. She indicates this not only by veiling herself, but also by *not talking* and *not sitting* on a chair. When conducting interviews, chatting informally or just overhearing other people's discussions, I got acquainted with this practice: women stopped talking every time their father-in-law (or other men in front of whom showing respect was necessary) was within interaction distance. In accordance, women would not sit on a chair in the presence of men. Among some *jātis*, such as Gujars, speaking out the husband's name was likewise forbidden. When Gujar women were asked about their husbands' names, either other women responded for them or they discreetly whispered the name.

In the village of Fatahpur I was interviewing young Banjārā women in the courtyard of their in-laws' house when their father-in-law woke up from his day nap. Hearing that we were talking about child marriage he seemed very suspicious and demanded that I show him my notes, which were written in English and Finnish. The old man, unable to read English (let alone Finnish), pretended to be checking all the questions and notes that I had written down. After "approving" them he handed the paper back to me. The man wanted to stay and observe, and since her daughters-in-law were unable to speak

out in the presence of him, it was quite challenging to conduct the interviews: the original informants had to whisper their answers, and father-in-law wanted me to pay attention to only his opinions. However, this meeting turned out to be quite fruitful in the end – especially from the point of view of the rules of avoidance between father-in-law and daughter-in-law.

### 5.3 "Arranged" divorce – notions of *nātā prathā*

I was told that in a Hindu woman's lifetime, sacred marriage can only take place once – she can perform the *pherā*<sup>17</sup> marriage ritual only once in her lifetime, whereas he – a Hindu man – can walk around the holy fire as many times as he wishes. Customary divorce and remarriage are, however, possible for women of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā.<sup>18</sup> This practice that consists of divorce, remarriage and compensation, is called *nātā* (see also Lambert 1997). Through *nātā prathā* ('*nātā* tradition'), a girl can be married off to different men several times without complicated legal proceedings. It needs to be emphasised that unlike a woman's first marriage, *nātā* is not considered a sacred marriage and in this way stands in opposition to it. Actually, *nātā* was not spoken of as a marriage at all as indicated by this extract from a group discussion in Kadbarā:

**Mukesh:** Can a woman get married for a second time?

**Devi and Lila:** No!

**Mukesh:** She cannot?

**Devi:** No, no.

**Madhu:** Yes, well, she can do *nātā*.

**Devi:** Yes, she does *nātā* (*hā, nātā to kare*).

Whereas a man may get remarried, a woman can only "do *nātā*". My informants explained that *nātā* is practiced if marriage life is set with difficulties, such as childlessness, sexual or mental problems, violence, continuous fighting, drug addiction or alcoholism, or if the spouses don't find each other compatible. All this can be

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<sup>17</sup> *Pherā* ('circling') or *sātphe* ('seven circumambulations') is a ritual core of a wedding involving rounds around a consecrated fire (*agni*). The bride and groom circumambulate the *agni* seven times, reciting specific, unbreakable vows with each circuit.

<sup>18</sup> Of my informants, only the Rājputs stated that *nātā* is under no circumstances accepted in their *jāti*, that is, for women. If a husband dies, remarriage is not possible even if it has just been one day since the wedding. If a woman remarries, the community and family will abandon her. Remarriage is possible for Rājput men. According to a middle-aged Rājput woman, her *jāti* does not practice child marriage because remarriage is banned. She saw this as an indication of her caste's upper status.

summoned in two words uttered by an elderly Bhīl woman in a group discussion in Makreṛī: *dukh hove*, "if there is suffering". Not much anthropological research has been done on *nātā* so far: among the few are Mehta (2004) and Majhi (2010). In her book about continuity and change in tribal culture, Majhi (ibid., 58) has listed the acceptable reasons for *nātā* (or *natra*, as the institution is known among the Bhīl of Udaipur District). According to her, divorce from the wife's initiative can be sought:

- If the husband is unable to earn money and cannot serve the family.
- If the husband is suffering from deadly diseases.
- If the husband is a heavy drinker and beats his wife brutally more often.

And from the husband's initiative:

- If the wife is suffering from infertility.
- If the wife is not able to bear a male child.
- If the wife is unable to do household chores properly
- If the wife is having post-marital sexual relations with others.

Majhi (2010, 58)

Usually it is the husband – or the members of his family in case the groom is a child – who calls off the marriage, sometimes even before it is consummated, i.e. before the *gaunā* ceremony. Such was the case of Ladduji, a Bhīl man who had left his wife because she did not take adequate responsibility over household chores. Divorce was granted to him on the community's verdict. If a man leaves his wife, the woman will be returned to her parents' house. If the couple has children, the children usually stay with their father, but if they are still infants at the time of the separation, they will go live with their mother until old enough to move to their father's. The bride price (see chapter seven) is not returned. Instead, when a woman remarries, her new husband pays the ex-husband an amount of money fixed by a *jāti panchāyat*<sup>19</sup>. This money is called *jhagrā*, 'argument, quarrel'; the term for the woman marrying for the second time is *jhagrā kī aurat*, 'woman of quarrel'. The value of *jhagrā* one has to pay is always a communal decision made by one's *jāti panchāyat*:

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<sup>19</sup> Each *jāti* has their own unit of governance called a *jāti panchāyat*. *Jāti panchāyats* ensure that the norms of the community are followed. *Jāti panchāyats* are most powerful in Rajasthan and in the eastern belt of India and they are notorious for punishments such as social boycott, beating, rape and honour killing. (The Times of India, 17th September 2009)

**Jelena:** What if a woman's first husband asks for a very large *jhagrā* from her new husband?

**Durga:** Then the community (*samāj*) gathers and makes a decision about *jhagrā*.

**Jelena:** Ok. So in the *jāti panchāyat* the people...

**Durga:** Yes, the *panch* [members of the council] fix it. The first husband can ask for as much as he wants [laughing], but the community members decide and fix how much he will get.

Through *nātā*, a woman's affinal relatives from the failed marriage are compensated by a second set of affines (Lambert 1997, 99–100). An important point about *nātā* is that just like the holy first marriage, it requires community acceptance. Many people said that a divorce taken from a woman's own will lowers her *izzat*. In contrast, if there are legitimate reasons recognised by the *jāti panchāyat* for divorce, and a girl's parents accept the divorce, her *izzat* will not be affected. However, it must be mentioned that there were differing views about the matter. Some people find *nātā* "bad", whereas some find it "good". One example of an "arranged" divorce was the case of 15-year-old Shanti, whose mother had decided that Shanti should divorce her husband because of his drug and drinking habit and consequent violent behaviour towards his wife. Shanti, herself, was of the opinion that child marriage is wrong. She had taken part in a training organised by Bal Rashmi Society and knew that the girls' legal age to get married is 18 years. When I asked her opinion on why the age has been fixed at 18, she replied that it is for girls to be able to study and make a living for themselves. A lack of education – both of girls themselves and of their parents – was the main reason for child marriage according to this 15-year-old girl. She mentioned that she would not have wanted to get married in the age of 13, but there was nothing she could do about it – marrying her off was her parents' decision. Shanti seemed happy now that her mother had decided to end her child marriage.

In case a husband left his wife, it was generally considered better for a woman to remarry: after the divorce, when she would return to live with her parents, some people would otherwise start gossiping that "she went here and there and talked to this and that man today". In other words, it is considered better for her honour to remarry than remain a divorcée. Unfortunately, finding a decent new husband for divorced girls or women was said to be relatively difficult, since the future husband has to be a married man, a divorcé or a widower. A divorced woman marrying a bachelor is not considered

appropriate. On the other hand, villagers said that whether a woman remarries or not depends on her *izzat*. As Mandelbaum (1988, 21–22, my italics) writes:

The kind of *izzat* open to a person and family depends on their social position. A family of generally poor, low-ranking group can scarcely aspire to the *izzat* attainable by a family rich in land and proud of inherited status. But there are families of greater and lesser *izzat* within each set; a family of lowly group may gain high regard both among its peers and more widely in its locality; one of high caste rank may come to be disdained by all.

Thus, a woman whose group is enjoying high regard among its peers may avoid *nātā*, whereas a woman belonging to a low-ranking group is more likely to remarry. It is an ambiguous situation: remarriage can both decrease and increase one's *izzat* depending on the social position of the family. A Rājput woman's remarriage is clearly a severe violation on her family's honour, whereas a Bhīl woman's remarriage might increase her personal as well as corporate *izzat*, or at least prevent the weakening of the group's position. On the other hand, if a Rājput woman's family is very high-ranking in terms of land ownership or political influence she may be allowed more freedom – her family already enjoys high prestige in their community due to their past achievements, and so, in this case, the conduct of women may not be the primary source of honour. In sum, "izzat and the dangers to it are judged in relative perspective" (Mandelbaum 1988, 22). I will return to this point in chapter six.

Although *nātā* can be considered a practice that enables the subordination of women, many of my female informants had contradicting views. As it is common for a woman to maintain links to her natal village, the parents of the woman stay informed of her life situation. She can talk to her parents about problems in marriage life, and from the parents' initiative, get a customary (*samājik*) divorce. Hanni, whose 17-year-old daughter was in the process of getting a *samājik* divorce, explained that it is "a punishment from the mother-in-law", as her son-in-law "is mentally disturbed and does not take care of the couple's baby". There were also some instances in the villages in which women had rejected their husbands in order to be with another man *of their own choice*. In these cases, too, *jhagrā* had to be paid by the new husband, but since such marriages were not accepted by the community, couples have had to flee from their villages. *Nātā* can also be practiced after the husband dies. As Durga stated quite



powerfully: "Before women used to jump into a fire after their husband because of his *izzat*, but nowadays women marry another man and run away."

Not everyone thinks that *nātā* is a legitimate practice. According to the people I talked to in Māngarh village, women are under no circumstances allowed to divorce their husbands provided that the couple has children. Even if a man is a violent alcoholic, his wife must remain with him. Still, the woman has certain cunning ways of expressing her discontent. Applying Scott's (1984) term, she can deploy forms of 'everyday resistance' – in this case, she can refuse to cook for her husband and deny his access to the house until he starts behaving himself. The following was stated by older women in the presence of middle-aged men and daughters-in-law of the village:

**Jelena:** Do men beat their wives? Is it right or wrong?

**Nandu:** If a woman has good characteristics, then he does not beat. If she has bad characteristics, he will beat (*acchā lakṣaṇ ho to nahī mare, būrā lakṣaṇ to mareṅge*).

**Jelena:** So it is right to beat?

**Nandu:** Yes, it is right.

**Jelena:** What does *lakṣaṇ* [quality, characteristic] mean?

**Nandu:** It means that if a woman talks with other men, goes wandering with other men...

**Jelena:** I see. And if the man beats without the woman having made any mistake, is it right?

**Nandu:** He will not beat without a mistake.

**Jelena:** And if he beats, then what?

[women talking]

**Nandu:** If the husband drinks and beats his wife without any reason, the woman will not give him food or a bed to sleep in and will kick him out [laughing].

Even if these kinds of things do not take place in practice (which I do not doubt), the fact that such a comment could be made in front of respected elderly men shows that women do, in fact, have some influence over their husbands even when *nātā* is not possible. The story of Sima will shed further light on the issue: Sima, a Bhīl woman in her late twenties or early thirties, had a husband with a drinking problem. The husband, named Khanna, did not give money for the couple's wedding expenses and eventually, for some reason or other, took a second wife – without Sima's consent – to live in the same house. Sima was discontent with the situation. She decided to take the kids and leave. After some time, Khanna realised that he needed his kids and begged Sima to return. She refused on the grounds that Khanna had taken another wife. Finally, Khanna agreed to divorce his second wife, and Sima and the children returned home.

Some informants explained *nātā* as meaning "another wife is taken". For men, *nātā* enables what can be termed as an 'acknowledged form of love marriage'. If a man wants a second wife, it is possible without divorcing the first one. Some men had two wives: their first marriage was an arranged one, whereas their second marriage was a love marriage. Polygyny is in fact widely accepted in the area. Everyone knew someone who had more than one wife. Polygyny can be practiced (1) if a man's first wife does not bear children, (2) if a man's first wife does not bear sons, (3) because of love or pleasure. A common statement in relation to polygyny was *apnī izzat ki bāt*, 'a matter of one's honour', referring to the continuity of the male line. Infertility is considered to be a woman's defect only.<sup>20</sup> Most people said that 2–3 is the maximum amount of wives for one man, but according to some, a man can have as much as seven wives.<sup>21</sup> Men with several wives are viewed as powerful in some villages. Generally, however, they do not possess higher status than ones in monogamous relationships – on the contrary, polygyny is frowned upon by some people. Especially women talked about it with bitterness, since the part of the first wife is described to be devoid of affection. When preparing for an interview in the village of Ummed Rāmjī kā Kheṛa, I witnessed a group of women gossiping disapprovingly about a Gujar man who had taken two wives against community acceptance.

In conclusion, differing opinions regarding *nātā* exist, but there is one common nominator: community endorsement is required – hence the title "arranged divorce". *Nātā* can be seen both as another practice contributing to the subordination of women, enabling a woman to be "sold" forward if the husband no longer has interest in her, and as a practice allowing widow remarriage and enabling women to get out of troublesome marriages. I would argue that the practices of child marriage and *nātā* go hand in hand, because without the latter, there would likely be a multitude of child widows and couples "unfit" for each other. In fact, some parents wanted their daughter's marriage to

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<sup>20</sup> Barren women are considered to bring bad luck. Applying Busby's (1997, 272) analysis of *hijras* it could be said that barren women become 'not-women' due to their inability to procreate with men. Gender does not reside in organs alone: "To be a woman is not only to possess breasts and a womb but to be able to menstruate, to carry a child, to breast feed it, to pass on blood and milk and thus transact in a female way" (Busby 1997, 266). In the villages of my fieldwork area, it was considered inauspicious to look at a barren woman's face in the morning. It is the fear of *karma* transfers, or, in Marriot and Inden's (1977, 231) terms – 'code-substance' – that makes the villagers cautious about associations with barren women.

<sup>21</sup> In Calu kā Duna I was told about a rich Banjārā man who had seven wives because he wanted to have many sons to inherit his extensive property.

be called off because the husband was too "young", or, in other words, sexually incapable and/or unable to provide for his family economically. 14-year-old Parvati explained how her mother and father were divorced because her father was too "small". Her mother was therefore married off to another man. It was impossible to predict this at the time of the marriage ceremony – both were only small children then. The same logic applies to the husband's drinking habit – the girl's parents could not suspect such a habit to develop when their son-in-law was still a child. Thus, *nātā* also functions as a kind of "corrective measure" from the part of the parents.

Although the area's people gave quite a monolithic picture of their marriage system in official interview situations, institutions like *nātā* seem to allow individual actors more agency than what is officially recognised. The authority of elders and their monological voices is valued at the level of discourse, but what actually happens is a different story. The institution of divorce appears to have a long tradition in the area, and as I have shown, it can be manipulated in a way that best suits the person's interests – sometimes even against prevailing cultural ideals. *Nātā* appears to be a backbone of the local marriage system. Compared to the first, sacred marriage *nātā* is given less value in the official discourse. Nevertheless, *nātā* corrects faults in the system, giving people alternatives when their marriages fail. In other words, *nātā* stands for hope.

## **chapter six | THREATS TO HONOUR**

Whereas arranged marriages uphold and recreate "the social order based on caste and gender hierarchies", love marriages challenge it. Aura (2008, 67) writes how fathers – having found out about their daughters' romantic relationships – told the daughters that they had "dishonoured his prestige" or "insulted him" and that the woman "no longer belong[ed] to the family". These comments are consistent with my findings: love marriage was seen as something that lessens the honour (*izzat kharāb ho jāve*<sup>22</sup>). In this chapter I will examine what happens when honour is threatened. Why are the villagers

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<sup>22</sup> Literally 'honour turns defective'.

so worried about losing honour? What does child marriage have to do with honour and shame? What kinds of threats is modernity seen to bring to the honour of one's family and caste, and how is this associated with child marriage? I will also discuss honour based on relatedness outside the *jāti* and the patriline. Why is the concept of locality-based honour important if one strives to understand the practice of child marriage in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā? Finally, I will analyse different kinds of hierarchies and see what the differentiation between and within *jātis* has to do with child marriage.

## 6.1 When incompatible substances mix

Female illiteracy is very high in the villages of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā. Men are supposed to provide financially for their families, whereas women have the responsibility of taking care of their husband and children at home. Preparing food, carrying water, washing dishes, fetching wood, working in the fields, tending goats and many other tasks are the women's responsibility. Marriage is the aim in a woman's life, and girls' education is thus considered irrelevant, or even harmful, because it enables girls to seek jobs in urban cities and abandon their homely roles. Also, since the residence pattern is patrilocal, girls do not stay with their parents after their marriages. It is the boys who provide for the parents in their old age. The value of female children is considered to be less than that of boys, because 'they do not serve their parents' (*ve mātā-pitā kā sevā nahī kartī*):

**Jelena:** Are girls and boys considered equals?

**Durga:** They are not equal. Girls are considered lesser beings.

**Jelena:** And why is that?

**Durga:** Sons stay at home and daughters move out. A son stays at home and does *sevā* ['service'] for his parents by providing for them.

**Jelena:** So if there are lots of daughters in the family, will it cause problems?

**Durga:** Yes, there will be problems. Who will do *sevā* if there are no sons? A second marriage is needed to have boys [another wife has to be married].

Since the education of girls does not benefit their parents, girls often remain at home and prepare to become good wives by practicing their household skills. Many girls in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā did not go to school at all; some went there irregularly or dropped out after a few years. Especially Bhīl women often remain uneducated – at the state level the female literacy rate of the Bhīl is only 19.1 % (Census of India 2001b). When I

asked about the reasons for not sending girls to school, I was often told that education is not as important for girls as it is for boys, but also that it is not *safe*. The way to the school might be long, boys might harass the girls en route, and there might be inappropriate relationships between the teacher and the school girls. A Bhīl woman in her thirties told me that her teenaged daughter is not going to school because of security reasons. The nearest secondary school was in Guṛhā, where a male teacher had previously had an affair with one of his students. The teacher ended up leaving his family and moving away with this girl. Later they even got married. The woman I interviewed said she did not want to send her daughter to school because she was afraid that her daughter might be taken sexual advantage of.

In the villages of Bijoliyā, sexual relations and marital unions between castes are strictly forbidden in view of the fact that they ruin a family's *izzat*. As shown in chapter five, the notions of a girl's virginity and chastity are bound to the honour of the family and *jāti*. Ghosh (2011, 208–209) writes how early marriage is used to minimise the risk of improper sexual relations, especially inter-caste marriages that put the whole community to shame. This is clearly the case in Bijoliyā also. It is feared that if not married off young, children will run away with boys and girls from other *jātis* or other persons of their own choice. In case a child elopes with a person from a different caste, his/her parents will lose their honour. Loss of honour is considered to be so detrimental that 40-year-old Pushpa declared that she will drink poison should her daughter ever run away. When questioned about the kinds of possible consequences of lost honour, the villagers stated that nobody would speak to them anymore, or invite them to weddings or other *jāti* celebrations, eat or drink in their house or offer them food or water. In other words, they would be socially boycotted. Also, people in other villages would start to gossip about the incidence. The mention of eating and drinking is interesting. In fact, in most parts of India, people are concerned about eating – about whom they share their meals with and whom the food is prepared by. When sharing food, people also share qualities with each other (Lamb 2000, 33). Marriott and Inden (1977, 223) explain how "one is always likely to become what he eats, and he may atomically be involved in what he feeds to others, especially when the food is hot. Hence the cooking and serving and eating of warm foods like boiled rice and ordinary fresh, unleavened bread are liminal processes in which bodily and nutritive substances must be very carefully managed". Thus, by refusing to share food with a family of low *izzat*, the community

symbolically designates the altered status of the family to it. This kind of symbolic behaviour reflects the detrimental actions of the family back to them from an external source. Through actions, such as refusing to share food, people know themselves as someone valued negatively by others. (Cf. Munn 1986)

According to Majhi (2010, 50), marriage by elopement is a recognised form of marriage in the Bhīl community. In this type of marriage a boy and a girl whose parents are not compliant with their knot-tying run away together. They return after some months to the girl's village. A bride price is then paid and their marriage sealed. Some people in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā admitted that this kind of marriage is, indeed, possible provided the runaway youth belong to the same caste. Not only the Bhīl but Lohars, too, stated that marriage by elopement is acknowledged. Nevertheless, I did not meet anyone or hear about anyone who had gotten married by elopement and returned to his or her village as an accepted member of the community.

In some villages of the area, elopements were said to be relatively frequent, while in others they were non-existent. Fear of elopement was, however, a widely shared concern. Elopement is especially harmful when the girl running away is an unmarried virgin (*kumārī* or *kanyā*). Khare writes how *kanyā* as a construct represents the two principal properties of *dharma*:

It is as much a *dharma* of womankind to yield culturally proper women as it is of mankind to retain or improve upon this *dharma*. The point is important since it shows integral conception of the system whereby each upholds the construction of the other rather than each being responsible for itself alone. [...] [Unmarried women] represent one of the most vulnerable – *dharma* harming – spots within the social system.

(Khare 1992, 149)

It can be said that a runaway *kanyā* embodies the failure of parental duties. It harms their *dharma* as much as it damages their daughter's *dharma* and consequently lessens their honour, too. The concrete punishment in the loss of one's honour is that *no one will want to share qualities with you*. Thus, one who has lost his/her honour no longer belongs to the community and, as pointed out by Chaudhary (2008, 13), the belief in the incompleteness of an individual is essential for understanding many practices of family life. Mines (1994, 189) makes similar conclusions in his study about Tamil

individuality: a person without kin is isolated and vulnerable. From this point of view, child marriage appears to be an option that ensures the continuity of the significant ties that make up a person. I argue that individuality of a person finds its expression in the world which we share with other people. By this I do not intend to deny the ontological status of inner feelings and reflective agency. What I am saying, instead, is that it is in the world that these embodied feelings, thoughts and actions become to determine one's individuality. One needs the world and other people in it to acknowledge one's individuality. Indian individuals do exist. However, they are essentially *individuals enmeshed in the world*.

In the village of Choṭa Thorota I was told a story about a 12-year-old Bhīl girl and a 14-year-old Bareth girl who ran away with two Bhīl boys. The children ran away to the forests of the secluded village of Māngarh, where they were found and brought back to their village. Afterwards they were all married off to other people chosen by their parents. In this case, the cause of child marriage was the elopement itself, not just the fear of it. This story was presented as a justification for early marriages of other children: when married off young, elopement will not occur, honour will be maintained and life will continue on the normal track.

In addition to losing one's status, elopement brings other problems, as well. If unmarried children run away, their parents have to pay a fee to the *jāti panchāyat* as a punishment:

**Mukesh [field coordinator]:** If a girl runs away with some boy, then what kinds of consequences are there?

**Pyari:** If she runs away with a member of a different *jāti*, she will be closed outside the community, and a payment has to be made as punishment.

The size of the fee is caste-specific – I was told that in the Dhakaṛ community it can be as much as 1 lakh (~1425 euros). Elopement is therefore not only socially but also financially destructive. There were differing accounts about who has to pay: in some *jātis* it was both the boy's and the girl's parents, whereas in others, such as the Banjārā *jāti*, only the boy's parents were obliged to pay. *Jāti panchāyats* have a significant amount of authority over the villagers, who do not seem to have much choice but to act according to the verdicts of the *panch*. Dr. Rajesh Gupta, head of the sociology

department at Rajasthan University, explains how these institutions are run on the principles of purity and pollution. According to him, the explanation for the nourishment of *jāti panchāyats* lies in the divisive education system and in the political parties that see castes as vote-banks and for that reason refrain from reacting to their extrajudicial punishments. (The Times of India, 17th September 2009) In a similar vein, Mehta (2004, 188) describes how *jāti panchāyats* have a strong influence on the life of Bhīls. According to her, the Bhīl turn to their local *jāti panchāyat* in any sorts of grievances, such as local disputes regarding land, criminal actions or marriage – especially the bride price. *Jāti panchāyats* generally give economic punishments, such as fines, but they can also impose corporal punishments.

A pregnant unmarried girl brings shame to the whole family. Many people told me that if an unmarried girl becomes pregnant, the girl will have to leave her home and her natal village. If a girl gets raped, it is again a matter of disgraced honour. Shubha, a Prajāpat girl currently aged 19, was married off in the age of about 13 years, because her body “looked like a woman’s body”, and according to her mother, boys started harassing her. Since most of the people I interviewed did not know their children’s age, the timing of the marriage could not be based on the calendar age. Some people considered a girl to become an adult when her menstruation periods begin. They held that a girl is ready for marriage irrespective of her calendar age as long as she is physically a woman. This is when the need to control the female sexuality begins. The marriage of two 15-year-olds might not be considered a child marriage at all. When I asked a Mina woman why she married off her 15–16-year-old son so young, she was confused – in her eyes her son was “big” (*moṭā*). In conclusion, there are differing views on the concepts of “child” and “adult” – an adult equals a person who is physically in a “marriageable” state in his or her life cycle. It is a point in life where boys and especially girls start evincing a gendered capacity to procreate and thus substantialise their physical differences. Performative differences are seen to arise out of these distinct physical attributes – the actions, on their part, feed back into the substances (Busby 1997, 272). A child is one that is not capable of transacting in a gendered way. In addition to passing on male substances and taking a female part in procreation, the capacity to carry out household tasks and perform farm labour is seen as another sign indicating readiness for marriage among the Bhīl (Majhi 2010, 50). Based on my findings, the same applies to other *jātis*, as well. “Being a man” is conceptualised as being able to provide for oneself as well as



one's family and being able to perform sexually, whereas "being a woman" is associated with being able to produce progeny.

Some of my informants shared the opinion that if a girl spends a lot of time talking to boys – in other words, does not maintain her chastity – she will be married off earlier. It is considered to be "shameless" behaviour if a girl spends time wandering around and chatting with boys other than those classified as brothers – if it leads to rape, it is her fault as much as the assailant's. This kind of view applies to India more generally, as can be concluded from the comments made about the incidence of gang rape on a 23-year-old woman in New Delhi in December 2012. According to spiritual leader Asaram Bapu, the woman could have saved herself by addressing the rapists as brothers and begging for mercy because she belongs to the "weaker sex". Since she did not, she is partially guilty for the committed crime. Mohan Bhagwat, leader of the Hindu nationalist organisation *Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), has identified the attacks on women with modern urban India, saying that these incidents do not happen in Bhārat (*Bhārat* is a Hindi word signifying 'India'). (Reuters, 9th January 2012) The juxtaposition of "urban, corrupted India" and "traditional, good Bhārat" could be seen in Bijoliyā, as well. In fact, the RSS is currently quite influential in the area, and as I was told, many members of the organisation support child marriage associating it with good old Bhārat.<sup>23</sup>

Rasmussen (2008, 49) ponders upon whether there is an emerging aspect of individual personhood identified with modernity in India. I am unable to take a stance on whether or not individual thinking is strengthening in the villages, but based on my findings there seemed to exist a contradiction between modernity (whether equated with individual thinking or not) and rural culture. In two villages inhabited by the Banjārā *jāti* I was told about the detrimental effect of mobile phones. According to Jagdish, an elderly Banjārā man, there used to be no child marriages among Banjārās. Nowadays modernity poses such threats to social order that it is felt necessary to marry off children

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<sup>23</sup> During my fieldwork I had some problems with RSS-minded people: one time my fiancé and I were followed home by a quarry manager from the RSS. He questioned the wife of Bal Rashmi Society's field coordinator (who lived in the same building just below us) about our intentions, because he had heard that I was doing research on child marriage. On another instance, a man thought that I was an American documentary film maker intending to portray Indian men in bad light. The founder of Bal Rashmi Society advised me not to talk about my study in Bijoliyā town, since it is such an emotive matter.

younger. He explained to me how children stay in contact with each other via mobile phones, sending each other text messages and arranging secret meetings. Boys cruise around on their Bajaj Autos and Hondas picking up girls for a bike ride. The situation just seems to be outside the elders' control. Similar accounts were narrated in another village situated on the other side of Bijoliyā town. A Banjārā woman in her thirties told how "the times are not good" – girls are married off in the age of 15–16 despite the ideal age of marriage, according to her, being 18–20 years. She continued that girls have to be married off younger because they talk on the phone with boys and that parents feel that the risk of elopement increases with available modern technology. Similar concerns seem to be shared on a wider scale in India. Doron (2012, 428) has shown how the prospect of an unmarried woman with a mobile phone causes anxiety for some heads of family in Banaras. New, often discreet relations transgressing the boundaries of caste can be formed through the mobile phone (*ibid.*, 429). However, no conclusions should be made that this would be the prevailing situation throughout the Subcontinent. According to Tenhunen (2013), these kinds of situations are rather an exception than a general condition. As a matter of fact, many husbands and fathers support the women's use of mobile phones. Doron (2012, 430) stresses how the acquisition, possession and use of mobile phones is highly contingent – it depends on context, local relationships, class distinctions and ideological views alike. Tacchi, Kitner & Crawford (2012, 535) point out that mobile phone usage does not bring about rapid change on its own, e.g. the emancipation or growing subjugation of women, but it can "highlight and challenge points of strain in gender, class and caste relations". The preoccupations of Banjārās over the mobile phone usage of women manifest their worry over the changing caste and gender relations. They equated these changes with the collision of the corrupted urban culture and the idealistic rural culture. The major issue is not the mobile phones *per se*, but rather the way they are used. I believe the worry over preserving rural Hindu culture has – at least in the case of Bijoliyā, if not on a wider scale – connections to the current political trend, namely, the strong stand of Hindu nationalist organisations.

In addition, the Banjārā, who are also known as the "gypsies of India" and are classed – depending on the Indian state – as either Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled Caste or Other Backward Class, may through child marriage try to gain higher regard in their localities. Jagdish, the Banjārā man with whom I conversed, was from a village resided by people from only two *jātis*: Banjārās and Dhakaṛs. The latter being the "dominant caste" it is

possible that the Banjārā try to imitate the customs and way of life of the Dhakaṛs, or any higher caste for that matter; to *Sanskritise* (Srinivas 1989) themselves and thus gain more prestige in their localities. In his article on the Santal tribe, Gautam (1977) ponders whether there is a trend towards Sanskritisation, or a trend he calls 'Santalization' going on among the tribe. He comes to the conclusion that their inclination has been towards the latter even though they have adopted various conventions of Hindu tradition. Gautam demonstrates how Santals adopt surrounding norms according to their needs and strengthen their inner solidarity as a distinct group. Strict observation of endogamy emphasises their distinction. Perhaps there is a similar process going on among Banjārās. Perhaps child marriage is felt necessary because of permanent co-residence with other *jātis* – Banjārās are traditionally a nomadic tribe. They might not try to imitate the way of life of caste-Hindus for purity reasons, but instead strengthen their identity as a distinct group. One of the means in this effort is the strict observance of endogamy. The Banjārā were currently disdained by all the other communities, as they were widely spoken of as bad-tempered, violent and aggressive people, "not good" in all the possible ways. Banjārā women were described as very strong, independent and loud, not really fulfilling the criteria for an ideal modest Hindu woman. One of my assistants seemed to be genuinely scared of Banjārās: she told me that it is dangerous to wander in their areas in the evening as Banjārā men drink alcohol and are prone to attack women. Due to my assistant's anxiety, we had to cut short a group discussion in the Banjārā village of Māṇḍayaraṛī and exceed the speed limit to get home. Banjārās themselves seemed to take great pride in their way of life, but whether or not there is an inclination towards "Banjarisation" going on among the group is out of reach for this study to determine. The relationships between *ādivāsīs* and the caste Hindus are, in any case, an interesting subject for future research.

## 6.2 Locality-based honour

Lambert writes how, in Rajasthan, "relationships of consanguinity within household and lineage are regarded as connections of substance arising naturally from biological processes". So, in her view, there is a "biological" component to kinship in Rajasthan, as well. Feelings of affection are thought to flow naturally along with substance, and this creates a model for what she calls 'optative relatedness'. (Lambert 2000, 75)

Locality-based ties are one form of this 'optative relatedness'. Next they shall be examined in relation to honour.

After marriage, the natal village and the maternal house (*pīthar*) in it remain important places for women. They travel back and forth between the village of their parents and that of their in-laws (*sasurāl*). In order to visit their parents, however, they have to get permission from their husband or parents-in-law. When I was visiting villages with my local female assistants, the conversations often started with talking about which village each person is from (instead of which caste they belong to, for example). This was followed by asking about the current place of residence – a procedure in accordance with Lambert's (2000) findings from another Rajasthani village. Also, my assistants frequently called those who were originally from the same village as they were their "sisters" and "brothers". In the same manner, one of my assistants, a Rājput by *jāti*, referred to her neighbour, who belonged to a lower Telī (Oil-presser) *jāti*, as "brother". She explained, that her neighbour is not a "real" brother but that their *relationship* is comparable to one that exists between siblings. Hence she calls him a brother. Lambert, as mentioned above, refers to these kinds of bonds as 'optative relatedness': relatedness which is modelled on biological bonds of consanguinity. The relations between persons "that are collectively recognized and regarded as enduring, as extending beyond individual interpersonal relationships, and as carrying rights and responsibilities associated with being related, is broader than the domain of 'kinship' as the latter is both locally and analytically understood". (Lambert 2000, 75) Enduring social relationships that have the potential to be politically and economically important can thus be based on shared origin. They are not confined to genetic connection. (Ibid., 77)

Daniel (1984, 63) emphasises the importance of the relationship between a Tamil person and the soil of his *ūr*, which Daniel defines as a named territory "(1) inhabited by human beings who are believed to share in the substance of the soil of that territory, and (2) a territory to which a Tamil cognitively orients himself at any given time". In Tamil beliefs, the soil substance is mixed with the bodily substances of the *ūr*'s inhabitants (ibid., 79). Village-based identities in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā can be illuminated by the following example: the importance of drinking water of one's own territory. In Rajasthan, it is common to attribute ill health to drinking water from outside one's village (Lambert 1997, 101). I experienced this concern as I was cautioned that I should

only drink the water of Bijoliyā town where my apartment was situated in. Craving for water under a blazing sun at one weekday noon I ignored these warnings and ended up having a throat infection, which required a doctor's visit. "Please, Jelena, in the future only drink the water of Bijoliyā", a Bal Rashmi worker pleaded afterwards.

As Lambert (1997, 101) points out, identification with a village and substance shared through a common microcosmos contradicts with hierarchical distinctions based on purity and impurity. Meaningful social relationships exist outside the patrilineal group and caste. Nevertheless, these relationships are controlled. There are limits to what is and what is not acceptable behaviour when it comes to inter-*jāti* relationships. As has been shown, marriage is one of the most fiercely objected forms of intermingling between *jātis* and still remains a taboo.

The following story will illustrate how deeply the preoccupation with honour is embedded in the bodies of villagers, and how villagers strive to maintain the collective honour. In one small village school, we were having a group discussion with local women. There was an older woman who had difficulties with walking, and so I offered her a chair to sit on. Despite my persuasions, appealing to *izzat*, she would not sit on the chair even though there were no men at sight. Only later did I come to realise the drawbacks of my own suppositions about the solidarity between women, homogenising them as "women" in opposition to the category of "men" and not considering the differences between them. The flaw, according to Strathern (1988, 64), is "a naive correspondence between the sexed individual and the autonomy of 'male' and 'female' viewpoints". As Jeffery and Jeffery (1994, 133) remind, it is often the women themselves who endorse the notions of family honour and shamelessness. Through their actions they display a form of agency that realises the gender-based code of conduct (ibid., 160). In this case, because of the strong bonds of locality, the matter of village honour was at stake as well. Not only would the old lady have ridiculed the honour of her husband's patriline, but the bonds of 'optative relatedness' would also have been endangered if the woman had in fact sat on that chair. As stated before, a relationship cannot be exclusive of "others" – in this case, the men of the village (Chaudhary 2008, 16). The men are present in the embodied behaviour of women all the time.

According to Marriott and Inden (1977, 231), in South Asia, bodies are conceived as inherently "moral". What is passed between people is 'code-substance' consisting of both bodily substance and moral qualities. Since locality-based sharing of substances occurs on a regular basis, as has been shown, it is important to maintain one's honour if one wishes to continue to engage in sharing particles with others. Early marriage is essential for maintaining not only familial, but also communal acceptance. Since the maintenance of honour is a responsibility of the whole village, it is common to pressurise one's neighbours to marry off their children. There are certain prescriptions for stage and age-appropriate contact with others, and in the absence of a key person, in this case a husband or wife, people are likely to make references to this fact persistently (Chaudhary 2008, 14):

If your daughters run away, neighbours will start talking that you should have married them off earlier. This would not have happened if you had paid attention and taken better care of them.

Hajirat

When preparing to conduct an interview in the village of Choṭa Thorota, three teenaged girls came to hang around and listen to us converse. We were all sipping hot chai and chitchatting about my engagement<sup>24</sup> – naturally – when an elder woman told me that one of the girls, 15 years old in estimation, should be married off soon because she had grown "big". They said that if the parents of the girl will not take the task of arranging her marriage soon, the villagers will start to pressurise them. Many people (before and after this episode) talked about the pressure to marry off the children in their teens. According to 30-year-old Sima, people will start gossiping that there is something wrong with a child if he or she is not married by the end of his/her late teens. I interpret the villagers' concern about marriage as anxiety rising from the fact that their lives as (in)dividuals in the world are intrinsically dependent on the actions that others in their singular forms embark on. Significant relationships have the potential to be both beneficial and destructive (cf. Kapferer 1997). Sometimes the situation is such that there is no room for individual choice whatsoever – the prescribed norms have to be obeyed in order to continue the significant relationships. Persons are made of each other, and

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<sup>24</sup> When people asked about my marital status I told them that I was engaged (*sagāi ho gāi hai*) and lived with my "husband" (*pati*). People usually regarded this as an equivalence of "marriage".

the conscious or unconscious acknowledgement of this fact is the source of both happiness and suffering, or, perhaps more appropriately, *sukha* and *duḥkha*.

### 6.3 Child marriage in an intersection of competing hierarchies

So far we have concluded that child marriage ensures the continuity of the significant ties that make up a person by controlling female sexuality and maintaining the honour of the family, patriline and village. Child marriage also upholds the social order, which is based on purity and impurity, and by some, it is identified with *dehātī* Bhārat as an antithesis to urban India. Next I will discuss different, partly overlapping prestige parameters. I will analyse the differentiation between and within *jātis* and see how they relate to child marriage.

According to Dumont (1980 [1966]), the caste system is the basic ideology of India. Religious hierarchy based on purity and impurity is separated from power, and the essential principle of the caste system is that power is subordinate to status, Kṣatriya is subordinate to Brahman. Contemporary ethnographies of caste have shown that even though caste endogamy is still widely practised, it is now justified by appealing to differing cultures that should not be mixed instead of suggesting a purity-based hierarchy. In addition, an increasing differentiation is taking place *within jātis* in terms of wealth, status and power. This development is further contributing to the decline of a clear-cut caste ranking, while at the same time, paradoxically, it is reinforcing the normative emphasis on difference *between* castes. While castes are substantialised at the ideological level, internally they are actually becoming increasingly heterogeneous at the empirical level. (Fuller 1997, 12–13) Bêteille (1997, 174) states in a similar fashion: "different criteria of status, different symbols of distinction and different strategies now co-exist in various sectors in Indian society".

In accordance with aforementioned writers, my material also suggests that an increasing heterogeneity is developing within *jātis*, while the distinctions between them are still maintained rigidly in everyday village life. As Fuller (1997, 15) reminds us, caste should not be analysed as a monolithic whole. The most apparent intra-caste difference in my fieldwork area lies in economic standing. In *tahsīl* Bijoliyā, influential, educated

people, such as mine owners and government officers are not dependent on norms set by *jāti panchāyats*. Education is highly valued and provides a possibility to climb up the social hierarchy. In Bijoliyā town, many people do not live according to the norms governing familial life set by caste councils due to their higher economic standing. There was even a mixed-caste couple living in my neighbourhood. It is the poor, uneducated, rural labour class that is subjected to the codes of conduct set by *jāti panchāyats*. This is in accordance with Mehta (2004, 188), who writes that the *jāti panchāyat* institution is losing its grip on the lives of the educated, urban Bhīl.

I was told that an educated, economically successful woman, a member of a *gram panchāyat* for example, can sit on a chair and remain unveiled in the presence of men. Two of my assistants – one of them a Rājput and the other a Dhakaṛ – had, in fact, chosen not to wear a *ghūnghaṭ*. Both of them were educated working women, one of them studying to become a nurse in Bangalore where she travelled alone every now and then to take exams. In the villages they were often asked about their marital situation – many people assumed that they were not married since they were unveiled. In a group interview of women I asked about a woman's possibilities to participate in political decision-making. They replied that if a woman is educated, she is "like a man", by which they meant that she has the same right to voice her opinions as men do. Public speaking is thus a gendered act: it is archotypically a male performance. Busby (1997, 271) contrasts gendered performances in India to ones in Melanesia: while a Melanesian woman acting "like a man" in a way becomes a man, in India she constitutes herself as a bad woman.<sup>25</sup> In the village community of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā, acting in a manner typical of the other sex arouses reprehension from the part of the community. Mines (1994, 21) uses the term 'contextualised individuality' to refer to the fact that "the individuality of persons is recognised within the context of groups where they are known and within which they have a known set of statuses and roles". These contexts include one's household, kin, caste community, and possibly institutions like political parties. In Bijoliyā a politically active woman's individuality was valued negatively due to her performance of gendered, archotypically male acts. By performing these kinds of acts, she lowers the *izzat* of her group – be it family, lineage or a whole village. A "good woman" involved in the village self-government is an oxymoron in these standards.

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<sup>25</sup> Busby's theory is relevant in the village environment that I was investigating but cannot be said to apply to India in general – there are, after all, numerous female political leaders in India.



Nevertheless, in the co-presence of different hierarchies, public speaking and political activity of women can be conceived as both good and bad at the same time depending on the context in which their individuality is judged. It is all relative. As Mandelbaum (1988, 22) puts it:

[Local public] opinion is rarely unanimous in judgement, is often volatile in ratings, usually varies among local groups but it is nonetheless a force that affects much of a person's and family's strivings.

Indian women first became visible in public activities when they joined the nationalistic movement. In the movement women were propagated as nurturers of the traditional Hindu way of life. The purpose was not to change their position in the society. In contemporary India, political organisations' women's wings still place more emphasis on preserving Hindu ideals than on women's own aims. (Tenhunen & Säävälä 2012, 85) In India, there is a certain quota for women in the *panchāyat* institution, and I met many women involved in local politics.<sup>26</sup> In Kadbaṛā village I was told about a Balāī (Scheduled Caste) woman who was the current *sarpanch*. A politically active woman may be valued positively and negatively at the same time – a woman can be seen as a capable member of the self-government, but at the same time it is thought that she should act according to her homely role. This is because politics is not a separate domain, but part of kinship and the domestic sphere (ibid.). In her analysis of the gendered understanding of politics in West Bengal, Tenhunen (2003) shows how the fact that politics does not exclude home, kinship and the women's domain not only limits, but also enables women's political participation. However, in the unofficial *jātī panchāyat* (caste council) women usually still have no standing whatsoever. It is an all-male institution following the hierarchy based on purity and impurity and it is out of bounds for women. Kerketta and Sharma (2006, 78) state similarly that women are not accepted in the traditional caste council – they are left with the part of occasional bystanders.

In contemporary India, the class positions one can achieve are not dictated by caste in a straightforward manner, some positions still being more probable than others for a member of a certain caste (Béteille 1965, 199). The Dhakaṛ, a *jāti* classed as OBC

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<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, some of the female members are mere puppets representing the views of their husbands.

(Other Backward Class) by the government, were considered the dominant caste of *tahsīl* Bijoliyā in terms of land ownership, political influence and education, even though they rank quite low on the purity–pollution parameter. Many Dhakaṛs were involved in the quarrying business and some held higher offices – as labourers they were usually specialised craftsmen (*kārīgar*). These craftsmen were paid better than unskilled workers (*mazdūr*), who were often Bhīls. As was mentioned in chapter four, the Dhakaṛ community had built a brand new private school in Bijoliyā town. Children of all castes were welcome, but they had to pay larger monthly fees than the Dhakaṛ. In everyday speech, the Dhakaṛ were referred to as rich and powerful people who do not practice child marriage anymore because their marriages are usually registered. However, I met several Dhakaṛ women in their twenties who had been married off in their childhood. One of them was my assistant who was made to tie the knot when she was only 10 years old. It seems that either the Dhakaṛ *jāti* has put an end to the practice during the last few years or that the richer Dhakaṛ want to distance themselves from child marriage by claiming that it doesn’t exist at all in their community (*samāj*). The custom of child marriage seems to be still very much alive, at least among the rural, poor Dhakaṛ. People often claimed that it is the Bhīl who exercise child marriage, because they do not have *samajh* (‘understanding’), they are backward and don’t care about education. Based on my interviews and observations this was not true. Child marriage exists among all the *jātis* in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā, but it is equated with the Bhīl in everyday speech, even though it is likely that it was the influence of Hindu culture that put a start to the Bhīl practice of early marriage in the first place. According to Majhi (2010, 48): ”A Bhil girl has a wide measure of freedom before marriage. She can dance, sing and can laugh and cut jokes with any man without reservation. The Bhil girls do not get married early. Generally, marriage takes place after their puberty.” The religion of the contemporary Bhīl is a syncretism of Hinduism and the group’s traditional religious beliefs. As mentioned, the Bhīl usually lived in separation from other groups in their own villages or hamlets because higher *jātis* found their ways of life – such as meat and alcohol consumption – detrimental. Sundā, a small exclusively Bhīl village located behind a quarry, was spoken of as an archetypal example of the traditional Bhīl way of life. The following extract from my field journal describes life in Sundā:

Sundā is located one kilometre from Ummedrāmjī kā Kherā. The road to the village is in very bad shape, and now, during the monsoon, it is full of puddles. The village has been

forced to move to make way for a red stone quarry. There are 80–90 people living in the village, and no schools, *anganvāḍī* [government-sponsored child-care and mother-care centre] or health care is available locally. A majority of the children of Sundā do not go to school because the road [to the nearest school in Ummedrāmjī kā Kherā] is dangerous and too long for small children to walk, especially if it rains. In the quarry, red stone is frequently extracted by blasting, and this, too, makes the road dangerous for children to walk on. In addition, children from other villages tease the Sundā kids at school. For all of these reasons, the parents prefer to keep their children at home.

The area of Sundā is very rugged and dry. There are no fields or ponds around the village. The village is built on a hill top – according to Mukesh [the field coordinator of Bal Rashmi Society], the villagers wanted to isolate themselves from the rest of the population. The villagers practice hunting in the surrounding forests and eat meat. They also worship local gods. Most of Sundā's men work in the quarries. All the residents of the village are Bhīl and they do not own land. People in Sundā are extremely poor: when I visited the village for the first time, local women apologised for not being able to offer me a cup of tea. They said that it is because they have nothing at all – no vegetables, no milk, no flour.

I claim that the equation between the Bhīl and child marriage has more to do with the group's economic and political position, and their way of life than its status in the purity–pollution continuum. This reflects the rhetoric of the government – child marriage is a practice of uneducated, backward communities. People do not want to associate themselves with these kinds of attributes. Qualities classed as negative in the rhetoric of the modern Indian state are projected onto the Bhīl. I argue that the animosity towards the Bhīl is further strengthened by social projects of NGOs that target their help towards certain *jātis*. This arouses feelings of jealousy and injustice on the part of those who are left without help. It further reinforces the conception of the Bhīl as a backward community. It is quite paradoxical that NGOs fighting against caste discrimination base their developmental programmes on caste.

By now it has become clear that child marriage is a very complex issue imposed with diverse values according to different, overlapping systems of hierarchy. On the one hand, differences between castes must be cherished, and one of the means to achieve this end is child marriage. The practice maintains the *dehātī* ('rural') culture while simultaneously constructing and preserving relational persons. On the other hand, child marriage is associated with a backward, uncivilised lifestyle that people want to distance themselves from – this is done by equating child marriage with the Bhīl and by saying that other people practice it only because they have no other option. It is the same as saying: "Practicing child marriage is in the *nature* of the Bhīl, but for us child marriage is only a necessary temporary practice generated by our current life situation.

The Bhīl do it because of what they *are*, we do it because of what *happened to us*. Child marriage has nothing to do with our *jāti* and it is certainly not our custom (*rivāj*).” Since there are many economically relatively well-off people who still practice child marriage, it is clear that the custom cannot be equated with poverty in a straightforward way. Neither can it be associated strictly with certain communities. The people know that while their caste or village community may place high value on child marriage, in other contexts, such as governmental institutions, it is valued negatively. Therefore, they place different emphases on different affiliations according to the context (cf. Fowler 2004, 47).

Another factor related to inter-*jāti* inequality is the different position of the groups in the quarrying industry. The Bhīl community forms a significant portion of the low-paid workforce in the stone quarries. The management, on the other hand, consists mostly of higher-caste persons. The Hindu nationalist organisation RSS has got links to the quarrying business; I got a personal reminder about this fact when an RSS-minded quarry official stalked me home. When the Bal Rashmi field coordinator and I later ran into him, he suggested that we direct “our help” to poor Brahmans instead of the SCs and STs. It seemed that he was against social welfare programmes directed to low castes and *ādivāsīs*. Representatives of Bal Rashmi Society told me that most people of the area support child marriage. It is, after all, in concordance with Hindu moral law promoted by the RSS.

## **chapter seven | TRANSACTING (IN)DIVIDUALS**

In her article about the rise of dowry in Janta, West Bengal, Tenhunen (2008, 1054) demonstrates how “gifts are essentially about constructing social and cultural identities: the interconnected domains of gender, kinship, caste and class”. I agree with Tenhunen (*ibid.*, 1037) that gift-giving cannot be examined from a purely economic viewpoint separate from cultural factors. In this chapter, the role of gifts in constructing social and cultural identities is exactly what I am interested in. Three kinds of marriage prestations – dowry, the gift of a virgin and bride price – are analysed in the context of child

marriage. I will begin by taking a brief look into the history of marriage prestations and the theory of 'marriage squeeze'. Why is bride price on the verge of resurgence, and what kind of implications does this have for child marriage and the status of women? Next, I will discuss the juxtaposition of dowry and bride price – what are the villagers' perceptions on these transactions, and how are the relationships based on kinship, caste, economy and religion constructed in their accounts? In chapter 7.3 I will move on to talk about the auspicious day of *Ākhā Tīj* and look into the religious, economic and political aspects of mass weddings of children. Why are mass weddings of children arranged? Finally, I will analyse prepubescent marriage as a matter of merit (*punya*) and see how it relates to the construction of personhood.

### **7.1 'Marriage squeeze(s)' and the comeback of bride price**

The history of marriage in India is relatively unexamined. According to Srinivas (1989) dowry used to be uncommon and almost all South Indian communities used to practice bride price. Meanwhile, in northern India, marriages among the upper castes were often hypergamous – in marriage a woman was given to a man of superior status and was accompanied by a gift of dowry (Hindi: *dahej*, Mewari: *dāyajo*) consisting of jewellery, clothing, grain, utensils and even occasional property. In lower castes, marriages were isogamous (occurred among status equals) and bride prices were more common. However, since the turn of the 20th century, many communities in India have switched from bride wealth to dowry, and the values of dowries have been increasing very rapidly. (Bhat & Halli 1999, 129)

Monica Das Gupta and Li Shuzhuo (1999) have constructed a theory about 'marriage squeeze' in China, South-Korea and India. In all of these three countries it is typical for men to marry into younger cohorts. According to Das Gupta and Shuzhuo, there has been a surplus of marriageable women since mortality started to decline. This "surplus" of marriageable women in India has been steady throughout the researcher duo's period of study (1920–1990, with the situation reversing in the 1980s) and has affected marriage payments. Das Gupta and Shuzhuo assume that "there has been a shift from bride price to dowry in India because of a shift to a surplus of women. Alternative ways of resolving this imbalance, for example by having women remain unmarried or marry

significantly younger men, were not culturally acceptable” (ibid., 642). They further suggest that the surplus of women in India will be replaced by a surplus of men in the near future, and that, in consequence, the ill-treatment of women will decrease: “[i]t is ironic that an increase of discrimination against girls may help to reduce dowry pressures and thereby indirectly reduce the extent of violence against women”. Nevertheless, Das Gupta and Shuzhuo admit that the shortage of women may lead to new types of violence, such as kidnappings. Although the *treatment* of women improves, women’s *autonomy* will not increase without fundamental changes in their position in the family and society. (Ibid., 643)

Jeffery (2013) criticises the ‘marriage squeeze’ theory for assuming that the “value” of women will increase. According to her, the patrilocal living arrangement combined with dowry upholds the vulnerability of women – dowry is thus somewhat independent of daughter aversion. She further points out that marriage markets are multiply segmented and that age is only one of the criteria for a prospective spouse: height, skin colour, caste, socio-economic position, occupation, etc., are also taken into consideration. There is what she calls a “sliding scale of simultaneous marriage squeezes” that operate in different ways. The resurgence of bride wealth is indeed possible on the bottom of the economic ladder, but on the top competition over successful young men keeps escalating.

My data shows that bride wealth is, indeed, increasing in popularity among the lower strata. It seems that the custom of bride price has traditionally been vital among the Bhīl of my research area. In recent years other castes in the area have also started demanding money from the to-be son-in-law’s kin by appealing to poverty. In her book about the cultural changes of Udaipur Bhīls, Majhi (2010, 52) describes how the bride price, or *dapa*, is fixed at the time of betrothal and may be paid either fully in cash or in cash and cattle. According to her data, the amount of bride price has been decreasing over the years with the uprising of dowry, and nowadays the Bhīl hesitate to talk about it (ibid., 123). This was not the situation in my research area – instead of avoiding the subject people openly expressed their perceptions of it. Also among the Bhīl of Bijoliyā it is customary that the groom’s kin pays a bride price to the bride’s kin. This payment, locally called *carī*, ranges from approximately 5 000 rupees to one lakh. The value of the *carī* is decided by the *jāti panchāyat*. Raigar, Balāī, Gosvam (Brahman sub-caste)

and Banjārā informants mentioned that some members of their *jātis* have adopted the custom of *carī* from the Bhīl and have, for poverty reasons, started “selling” (*becnā*) their daughters. According to my informants, a part of the bride wealth is used to pay for the marriage ceremony and fostering (*pālan-poṣaṇ*) of the bride between the wedding and the *gaunā* ceremony – this is partly returned in the form of dowry and includes clothes and other items for the bride herself – and the rest is used for the bride price of the family’s sons’ future wives. Thus, and this is an important point to keep in mind, boys cannot be married off before their sisters. As Tambiah (1973, 62) states: “In countries like India and Ceylon not only do sisters marry at an earlier age than their brothers but also brothers usually cannot marry until their sisters are married unless a large age gap separates them”.

The Bhīl (and probably other *jātis* as well) often need to lend money with high interests to be able to pay their bride prices. While most informants were of the opinion that the value of bride price does not depend on the girl’s age and that the amount is fixed by a *jāti panchāyat*, some presented contradicting views. I was told that when a girl gets older, she starts demanding more things, such as better-quality clothes for her dowry. As a consequence, her parents present their high bride price demand to the *panchāyat*, which can then decide whether or not it is accepted. When parents ask for more bride price, their daughter’s desirability on the “marriage market” decreases – the groom’s lineage usually prefers younger brides who do not desire for luxurious things. According to Maddu, a Balāī woman in her thirties, the price to be paid for a small girl is 50 000 rupees, whereas it is one lakh for a grown woman, because she will demand better clothes, jewellery, etc. Laughingly she said that she is planning to demand one lakh for both of her daughters’ bride price because there is a serious shortage of women. The shortage of women is mainly attributed to daughter aversion. She continued by telling me about her neighbour, a middle-aged man who still hasn’t found a wife. The same theme came up in a women’s group discussion in Nīm kā Kheṛā: the women stated that “there are less girls, so if we do not give *carī*, our sons cannot get married”.

These kinds of comments support the speculations of Das Gupta and Shuzhuo (1999): the “surplus” of men appears to lead to a rise in the “market value” of women. However, I agree with Jeffery (2013) in that the general status of women remains intact. As long as women cannot inherit and the residence pattern is patrilocal, their

subjugation will remain. The nonexistent or minimal retirement allowance contributes to the fact that sons – who stay in their natal home – have to take care of their parents in their old age, and they are thus highly valued. A lot of resources are invested in boys' education, whereas educating girls is considered somewhat insignificant or even harmful. In a training organised for teenaged girls by Bal Rashmi Society, none of the 21 girls attending went to school. Eight out of these girls were already married. However, nowadays more and more parents in *tāhsil* Bijoliyā are starting to enrol their daughters in government schools, partly because of the free lunch served at schools and because sending all the children to school is a precondition for getting assistance from Bal Rashmi Society. Nevertheless, even though more and more children go to school, the effects of being enrolled in a school are questionable: the quality of teaching in rural public schools is very poor in many subjects, there are days when the teachers do not even show up, and many children attend irregularly. The ones who can afford and place high value on their children's education, enrol them in private schools. Presumably, it is mostly boys who get this chance. A teacher in Devnagar public primary school summed up his opinion about the problems in education as follows:

The biggest problem is that most of the children do not attend regularly. Their level is very bad. [...] Alcoholism is a big problem and many men use their wages on cheap liquor instead of their children's education. Most parents do not send their children to secondary school.

## 1.2 ***Dharmik* gifts, profane transactions**

The performing of Dharma means the performing of the individual duties of class and Āsrama [the four stages of life for men], as realised by personal experience in the more developed stages. It brings as fruit happiness in one or more of its forms, (according to the alignment of the other ends to Dharma): health and wealth, pleasure, happiness, and bliss.

(Mees 1980, 28)

As stated in chapter five, arranging the marriage of one's children is considered a matter of *dharma*: a matter which brings happiness, pleasure and relief. The fruitful consequences of performing *dharma* were emphasised by my informants as well, especially in the context of marriage. It is of utmost importance that the girl getting married is a virgin (*kanyā*). For Hindus *kanyā* is connected to the idea of *dān*: it is



*kanyā dān*, the 'gift of a virgin' that yields a proper marriage and finally a proper birth. *Kanyā dān* is the most auspicious gift that a man can give. It is culturally anomalous to call a pregnant unmarried girl a *kanyā*. (Khare 1992, 149) Fruzzetti (1982, 9) analyses Bengali marriage as consisting of two major elements: the sacred *sampradān* (Hindi: *kanyā dān*) and the payment of dowry that accompanies it. According to Fruzzetti, dowry precedes the actual marriage ritual and can be considered in economic terms alone. This dual mode of exchange brings together the sacred and the non-sacred. Tambiah (1973) similarly shows how dowry is a "gift" accompanying *kanyā dān*. He sees this as an aspect of hypergamy, a family of lower status trying to gain prestige by marrying off their daughters to a superior – an exchange of status for wealth. In this process of prestations, a daughter and her dowry become vehicles for establishing a relationship of affinity between two families. Importantly, Tambiah sees dowry as a woman's "pre-mortem inheritance" that the woman takes with her on the dissolution of marriage. (Tambiah 1973, 64) Raheja criticises Tambiah in her analysis from Pahansu, Uttar Pradesh, in demonstrating that hypergamous ethos may be contextually distinct from the *kanyā dān* and dowry, and that Tambiah's analysis of dowry as "pre-mortem inheritance" does not accord with linguistic and ritual data. She suggests instead that "hierarchy must be understood as a cultural construct that may be implemented and foregrounded only in some contexts of social life; it is not necessarily the foregrounded aspect of relationships when the giving of *dān* is at issue". (Raheja 1988, 119) In her study Raheja found that while the giving of *dān* is not associated with the status differences between wife-givers and wife-takers, it is anyhow considered crucially important. She concludes that *kanyā dān* may have connections to hypergamy in some castes in North India, but this connection cannot be said to be universal or central to the definition of *kanyā dān*. (Ibid., 121)

In accordance with Raheja's findings, there did not seem to exist a formalised system of rank within *jātis* in Bijoliyā. When I asked my informants about possible marriage partners, the answer was that they can marry anyone from the same caste excluding the members of one's own, one's mother's and one's paternal grandmother's *gots* (see p. 39). There is no specific intra-caste class from which the marriage partner should be chosen. Especially the Bhīl stated that all *gots* are equal in status and eligible for marriage. Dowry, on the other hand, was generally not seen as a woman's personal property in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā– in case of *nātā* a woman had to leave all the belongings

received as dowry in her marital house. Dowry is essentially a part of the relations formed through uniting two people in marriage. It cannot be taken apart from those ties.

The custom of *carī* is strictly contrasted with dowry and *kanyā dān*. Dowry is spoken of as a 'matter of *dharma*' (*dharam kī bāt*), whereas bride price is considered merely an economic transaction or even something that is against *dharma*. Nicholas (1995, 143–144) writes how bride price, or *kanyā-pana*, is referred to as the "anti-gods' rite" in the *dharmasāstras*. In rural Bengal, until the middle of the twentieth century, *kanyā-pana* was practiced only by the lower castes, while giving dowry was nearly universal among the higher castes. According to my informants, *cārī* is only asked for if the bride's family does not have enough money for all the essential marriage arrangements. Demanding for bride wealth is not considered a virtuous act – quite the opposite. For the Bhīl, bride price is an established custom, but members of other castes said that it is only practiced under severe conditions of poverty, because it is not *dhārmik*. The situation is thus the same as with child marriage: villagers claim that it is the *way of life* of the Bhīl to practice bride price, whereas other castes only temporarily make use of it for practical reasons. The inferiority of the Bhīl is naturalised on all status parameters. Distinction from the Bhīl is maintained and even strengthened on the ideological level, while the ways of life of different castes are actually getting increasingly alike on the empirical level. This growing homogeneity between *jātis* can be observed, but it is not spoken of.

An important point is that bride price and dowry exist coincidentally. Even if a family practices bride price, *dāyajo* (dowry) is an essential part of marriage, and among my informants it usually consists of utensils and other kitchenware. Some families might demand such things as a TV, a motorcycle or jewellery, but since my informants were mostly very poor, demanding or giving costly dowries was not possible. They emphasised that when dowry is given from one's own free will, only then is it *dhārmik*: in accordance with the codes of conduct. Ghosh's (2011) data from the Malda District of West Bengal suggested that one of the reasons for early marriage was the fear of exorbitant dowry later on. This is not how the dowry system works in southern Rajasthan: according to my informants, children's age does not have a direct effect on the value of dowry. The interviewees said that they were happy to give dowry because it is considered to be for the well-being of their daughter in her new home. Without

*dāyajo*, the girl will suffer in her new home. As one informant put it, the first thing the new in-laws ask is "What did you bring?". However, women in Berisal village said that nowadays lavish dowries are not demanded because people understand that if they ask for a high dowry, they themselves will have to pay more when their daughters get married. Villagers also said that there are fewer girls than boys, and therefore they cannot ask for an unconscionable dowry – otherwise their sons would remain unmarried. Tenhunen (2008, 1045) has demonstrated how villagers in Janta, West Bengal, said that it is hard for landless and marginal landowners and unemployed men to find a wife. Even though the higher strata of the society continue to ask for exorbitant dowries, dowry demands are simultaneously decreasing among the lower classes. This, according to the villagers, was due to the distorted gender ratio.

### 7.3 Mass weddings of children

In *tahsīl* Bijolīyā, as in Rajasthan more generally, it is customary for Hindus and Jains to marry on the auspicious day of *Akṣaya Tṛtīyā*, more commonly known as *Ākhā Tīj*. It is one of the four most important auspicious days in the Hindu calendar and it falls on the third lunar day (*tithi*) of the bright half (*śukla pakṣa*) of *Vaiśākha* month. It is believed that the Sun and the Moon are most radiant and best placed on this day, and therefore no astrologer needs to be consulted about the most auspicious timing for the marriage (*muhūrta*). Most of the people interviewed had got married on this very day. It is also common to arrange mass weddings of children on *Ākhā Tīj*. Not only is *Ākhā Tīj* a holy time ideal for marriage, but it is also cheaper to tie the knot at this time. In this chapter, I will discuss the intersections of economic and religious aspects of child marriage. I will tackle this by looking into the informants' perceptions on the significance of mass weddings during *Akṣaya Tṛtīyā*.

Tenhunen (2008, 1044) writes that in the West Bengali village of Janta, raising dowry demands have given rise to alternative marriage practices: marriages are often arranged suddenly in order to avoid the feeding costs of extended kin. Villagers of *tahsīl* Bijolīyā likewise emphasised the cost-effectiveness of certain marriage practices. However, in contrast to arranging marriages suddenly, most marriages in Bijolīyā are arranged on "the fixed date" of *Ākhā Tīj*. Villagers said that it is cheap to arrange the marriage of

children on this day – when children are married off simultaneously, the costs can be shared between several families. Moreover, money is saved because many relatives will be busy attending someone else’s party. Parents are spared from having to treat all aunts and uncles for days on end, yet important family relations are maintained with the help of wedding invitations. Another pro, according to the villagers, in choosing *Ākhā Tīj* as the wedding day is that it is celebrated during the hot season, and there is thus no need to rent beds or provide bed sheets for guests. To summarise, there are less guests and the few that come do not require expensive lodging arrangements. Also, harvest time has passed and people have resources and free time to enjoy the celebrations:

Marriages usually take place early in the summer, after harvesting is in and the people are relatively at ease. All the while, the boy’s parents would be making up the amount of *dapa* (bride price) to be paid at the time of marriage. Savings of a number of years, together with the proceeds from the sale of that year’s harvest go into it.

(Majhi 2010, 51)

It is not unusual for all the daughters of a family to be married off together in a shared wedding. A common saying in *tahsīl* Bijolīyā was *moṭī ke sāth choṭī ko nikal denā*, ‘the little one is given away with the big one’. The only reason given for this sort of procedure was that it saves money. Many people were of the opinion that each daughter should have a separate wedding but that it is economically impossible to arrange this. Nanni, a 35-year-old Banjārā woman had been married off together with her three older sisters at the age of five years. *Gaunā* had taken place ten years later.

Many times, weddings are arranged secretly in the surrounding forests because there are frequent police inspections in the area, especially during *Ākhā Tīj*. Both administration officers and the Rajasthan police have been directed to prevent child marriage. This year the state government has appealed to *gram panchāyat* members to keep tabs on child marriages. The government has issued that the date of birth of the bride and groom must be printed on wedding invitation cards. In addition, actions will also be taken against caterers and music bands that provide their services at child weddings. (The Times of India, 13th May 2013) In Kalighati village I was told that child marriages had not taken place that year (2012) due to police actions, whereas the medium age of marriage in the past years was estimated at 10–12. Durga Lal, a Bhīl farmer in his fifties, told me that in his opinion it is a good thing that this is the case but that there are disputes about the

matter in his village. In Sadarāmjī kā Kheṛā I met a 13-year-old girl who had been married off two years ago. The villagers said that it was the last time there were child marriages in Sadarāmjī kā Kheṛā, and that even back then the weddings were organised outside village boundaries in densely-grown forests. Many informants indicated that despite police inspections and government efforts, child marriage continues to thrive. According to Hajirat, a young Bhīl man, the police can be easily bribed to stay away and also to warn about future checks. A primary school teacher in Devnagar public school was also of the opinion that people find creative ways to reach their goals:

The frequency of child marriage used to be 100 %, everyone was married off in the age of 11. Nowadays the villagers organise their child marriages secretly in the forests. These people are very clever (*hośiyār*).

#### **7.4 Prepubescent marriage and the accumulation of *punya***

The only friend who follows me even after death is Dharma; for everything else is lost at the same time when the body perishes.

(Manu VIII: 17 according to Mees 1980, 12)

According to Keyes, practicing Hindus widely believe that god has "written" one's karmic destiny on one's forehead at birth. While there are circumstances under which one's *karma* can be altered, certain absolute and final consequences of *karma* remain. (Keyes 1983, 15) Enhancement of one's karmic prospects is done through the accumulation of *punya* ('merit') in a result of *dhārmik* actions and thoughts. The good deeds performed in this life are carried on into the next one, and ultimately the accumulation of *punya* is believed to lead to *mokṣa*, liberation from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of death and rebirth. Some of my informants, especially the uneducated, believed that marrying off a girl before her menarche brings *punya* to the one arranging the wedding. Arranging the marriage of a premenarcheal girl was considered to be *dharam kī bāt*, a virtuous deed that a man carries with himself into the next life. Some people said that if a girl is married off before she reaches puberty, her parents will be reborn into a higher caste. Correspondingly, it is not considered wise to delay the marriage of one's daughter. Considering the aforementioned, I argue that a father marrying off his prepubescent daughter performs an ultimate *kanyā dān* that earns him a lot of *punya*.

The theme of child marriage has been present in ancient Hindu scriptures as early as in the *dharmasūtras*<sup>27</sup> of 600 B.C.–300 B.C.:

Let him give his daughter, while she still goes naked, to a man who has not broken the vow of chastity and who possesses good qualities, or even to one destitute of good qualities; let him not keep (the maiden) in (his house) after she has reached the age of puberty.

(Baudhayana-dharmasūtra according to Kapadia 1966 [1955], 138)

[T]he father should give away his daughter while she is still *nagnikā* [one that has not attained puberty] through the fear of her attaining puberty (while unmarried).

(Vasiṣṭha-dharmasūtra 17. 70 according to Kane 1974, 440–441)

[A] girl should be given in marriage before she attains the age of puberty. He who neglects it commits sin. Some declare that she should be given in marriage before she begins to wear clothes. A marriageable girl (who is not given in marriage by her father &c.) should allow three months period to pass and afterwards unite herself to a blameless man of her own will and give up the ornaments received from her father (or her family).

(Dharmasūtra of Gautama 18. 20–23 according to Kane 1974, 442)

Kapadia (1966) is doubtful as to whether infant marriage was actually practiced at the time these texts were written. *Mahābhārata*, one of the two great epics of ancient India, shows that virginity was not necessarily demanded of a girl. The intention of the Brahmin writers of *dharmaśāstras* was to raise the morality of the society, and so they held up virginity as a virtue in woman. Virginity thus began to signify high caste and marriage was most desirable before there was any space for suspicion about the virginity of a girl. (Kapadia 1966, 138–140) I have chosen to take up these texts because they show how virginity has been associated as being a woman's virtue for centuries in India. No reference was made to *dharmaśāstras* by my informants, but the content of the three quotations is similar to that of the discourse circulating in *tahsīl* Bijolīyā. This is in line with Fuller (2004, 6) who states that the concepts, ideas, and speculations present in the sacred texts are often vitally important to popular Hinduism.

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<sup>27</sup> "The term *dharmaśāstra* is used with two different meanings. It either encompasses both the *dharmaśāstras* and the *dharmasūtras*, i.e. the entire *smṛti*, or it is restricted to the *dharmaśāstras* in a narrower sense [...] Although occasionally mixed with verse, the *dharmasūtras* are in prose. By definition, a *sūtra* is a brief, aphoristic statement, in which not a single word or syllable is meaningless. *Sūtras* are meant to be learned by heart first, only later to be explained by means of an oral or written commentary." (Rocher 2013)

If a father of a girl is very poor and cannot afford to arrange the marriage of his daughter, it is possible for him to get financial assistance. In this case the one financing the marriage obtains *punya*:

If a man has 3–5 daughters and he is poor, the girls' mother's brother will arrange the marriages of the girls. This will bring *punya* for him.

Mange

The fact that Mange specifically mentioned the mother's brother needs to be explained further. In her ethnography of Nimkhera village in Madhya Pradesh, Jacobson (1977, 266) writes how many women spend significant amounts of time in their mother's brother's homes, especially in their childhood and young adult years. The relationship between a woman and her brother is thus not broken off at the time of marriage – on the contrary, the tie between a woman and her natal village seems to be permanent. In *tahsīl* Bijolīyā a festival called *Rakṣā Bandhan* ('the bond of protection'), celebrated in the month of *Śrāvaṇa* of the Hindu calendar, was considered to be very significant. *Rākhī*, a holy thread that comes in various designs and colours, is tied by sisters on the wrist of their brothers. I was told that a *rākhī* signifies a sister's love and gratitude for her brother's lifelong promise to protect her. Not only consanguine brothers, but male cousins and close "village brothers" are given *rākhīs*. On *Rakṣā Bandhan* nearly all the women from my research area travelled to their natal villages to spend time with kin. The district bus company even provided women with cost-free tickets. Perez (2006, 98) writes similarly that among the Vankar of rural Gujarat, the brother–sister relationship is very close and affectionate. The *rākhī* rite is meant to represent a link between a woman and her kin and to sustain their ties after marriage that tends to separate them.

A girl's mother's brother is not the only one to take up the task of arranging marriage. Especially during the *Ākhā Tīj* people get donations from the wealthy to cover the costs of child marriages. Mass weddings of tens of child couples might take place simultaneously. In Calu kā Duna, I was told about a wealthy man who had arranged a mass wedding of 108 child couples in order to obtain *punya* for himself. In this way he transformed his economic resources into spiritual assets that enhance his status in the next life. He was able to alter his karmic prospects, so to speak, through the tactful distribution of gifts. However, in order to enhance his own position in the next life, he

was dependent on other people. Without premenarcheal girls, he would not have been able to execute his individual intentions.

Mandelbaum (1988, 23) explains how a man's desire to achieve a high degree of *izzat* is also a means of overcoming oblivion – a dimension of honour that is more internal to the individual. In addition to *punya*, a man performing the ultimate *kanyā dān* makes a good name for himself in this life – a name that will be long remembered. Through this act the memory of him will last after he has passed away. Power plays a significant part in this endeavour. In the context of mass child marriages, property is a precondition to social honour and *punya*. A man, who has moved upwards within the class system, is able to use this acquired economic power to enhance his position in the caste system. These wealthy men might not marry off their own daughters at a young age because they are aware of the negative consequences of the conduct. In this they rely on different kinds of values that are kept distinct from the ones having to do with the principle of purity. However, wealthy men are able to "appropriate" other men's *kanyā dān* due to the financial resources available to them. The poor are relieved from the stress of marrying off their daughters, while the wealthy not only enjoy the spiritual benefits of the practice, but also make a good name for themselves. They become important persons and attributes such as generosity and *izzat* characterise their 'civic individuality' (Mines 1994). Their individuality will also be known more widely. Through the cultural definition and valuation of attributes "individuality in private life intersects with individuality expressed in public life". (Mines 1994, 19) I argue that Mines' (ibid., 20) characterisation of a Tamil person's identity can be applied to illuminate some aspects of North Indian personhood, as well. According to his analysis, civic individuality is achieved in part by the person's social position – a mother of sons or a head of household, for example – and in part by behaviour that determines one's reputation and direction in life:

It is this dual perception of responsibility, a person's own awareness of responsibility and society's judgement of the execution of the responsibilities, that joins private and civic expressions of individuality, the twin facets of a Tamil's sense of self.

(Mines 1994, 20)

To sum up, through donation for child marriage a man achieves *izzat* and *punya* that enhance his individual status both in this life and the next. His civic character will be



valued positively and his individuality known more widely. What I am suggesting is that this is a feature of Indian personhood that Marriot and Inden's (1977) theory of 'dividuals' does not take into account. It is an aspect of personhood that regards individuals as agents of their own destinies (cf. Mines 1994, 204). These persons are, nevertheless, entangled in the webs of social relationships. Firstly, as agents persons may have individual goals, but they are, nevertheless, dependent on others' in executing these actions. Secondly, they cannot entirely predict the outcomes of their actions, which are always judged and valued socially. As malleable (in)dividuals, North Indian persons are directed towards the world in which they exchange substances with other malleable beings.

Finally, something needs to be said about critical discourses. Not everyone in *tahsīl* Bijolīyā supported marriages of little children. Puna, a 24-year-old illiterate Bhatt woman was of the opinion that only old women believed in the accumulation of *punya* through prepubescent marriage, and that a change is needed in their mental inertia – this is the primary way to put an end to child marriage, says Puna. Puna herself has been married off at the age of ten and sent to her husband's house eight years later. She also said that nowadays children are consulted about their prospective partners and that marriage will not take place if the partners do not find each other compatible. Many women belonging to a younger generation shared Puna's opinions. They said that 18 is a good age for girls to get married because at that age they are physically and mentally developed. It seemed that people living in the villages close to Bijolīyā town or the highway did not support prepubescent marriage. Thus, it was generally the illiterate older people living in remote villages that favoured marriage of premenarcheal girls. However, there were critical opinions inside this category of people, too. According to 60-year-old illiterate housewife Nannibai, religious reasons for child marriage no longer prevail, and poverty combined with large family sizes is what sustains the practice. She did not see child marriage as an important custom *per se* but simply as a symptom of poverty. Nannibai said that people are beginning to understand that child marriage is not good and that police actions are needed to stop it.

## chapter eight | CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis I have examined child marriage in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā of the northwest Indian state of Rajasthan. My first aim was to make the historical, regional meanings of child marriage intelligible through the investigation of the villagers' perceptions and practices. The second question concerned the constitution of child marriage in an intersection of different inequalities. Here my particular focus was on the investigation of unequal social relations pertaining to caste, kinship, gender, economy, politics and religion. How do these relationships become visible in actions and perceptions relating to child marriage? The third aim, and the major theoretical underpinning of my thesis, was the analysis of North Indian personhood and relatedness in the context of child marriage.

I have shown that the prevalence of child marriage cannot be reduced to a single aspect: the practice continues in an intersection of several economic, political, social, and cultural factors. Firstly, I demonstrated how arranged marriage is the critical institution of the Hindu societal order and, consequently, how children's elopement, inter-*jāti* relationships, rape, premarital sex, and love marriage threaten this order. Sexual and marital unions between *jātis* or relationships otherwise deemed improper lessen the individual's and the whole social group's honour. Female behaviour, especially, is bound to the honour of the family, the *jāti*, and the whole village, since unmarried women represent the most *dharma*-harming spots in the system (Khare 1992, 149). There is thus a need to control the girls' sexuality. The female practice of covering one's face with a veil (*ghūnghaṭ*) was examined in order to shed light on the status distinctions between different categories of people, and understand the role of women in maintaining the group honour.

The fluidity of boundaries was offered as an explanation for the fear of mixing different categories: bodies are conceived inherently moral and what passes between them is both physical substance and moral qualities – something that Marriott and Inden (1977) call 'code-substance'. I demonstrated how a person's loss of honour (*izzat*) results in a situation in which his/her significant others no longer want to share substances with the person. Depending on the severity of the wrongdoing, one can even be banished from

the village for good. In case a social norm is broken, monetary punishment is also likely: a fine has to be paid to the *jāti panchāyat*, caste-based governing institution, according to the verdict of the headman. In light of the aforementioned perceptions and practices, most villagers saw child marriage as a preventive measure – it eliminates or at least lessens the risk of both debased social honour and economic loss. As I demonstrated, the role of *jāti panchāyats* in matters relating to the norms of the community was significant.

I argued that locality-based sharing of substances, or what Lambert (2000, 75) calls a form of 'optative relatedness', needs to be included in the analysis if one strives to understand child marriage. Without relational bonds, whether they pertain to the family, the lineage or the village, a person will be left isolated. Since the maintenance of honour belongs to the whole village, it is usual that villagers compel each other to marry off the children when they have reached a "marriageable state". Most of the people that I interviewed were illiterate and were thus unaware of their children's calendar age. Instead of age, physical attributes and the ability to work were seen as factors that define the proper time for marriage. Menstruation, female body figures and the ability to conduct household chores signified the readiness of girls, whereas being 'big' (*moṭā*) and able to take responsibility over the family was emphasised in the case of boys. Due to defining the categories of "child" and "adult" differently from, e.g., the Constitution of India, a marriage of two 15-year-olds was not considered a child marriage. A child was seen as someone incapable of procreating and unable to transact in a gendered way (Busby 1997). Femaleness was constructed as pertaining to the ability to produce children whereas maleness was related to sexual potency and the ability to provide for the family. If a man was sexually potent he was considered to be able to procreate, as well. The fact that infertility was seen as only a woman's defect underlines this point. As Busby (1997, 267) points out, re-evaluation of bodily gender is needed if one does not succeed in transacting according to one's physical attributes. Thus, a man is still a man if his sperm is infertile, but a woman becomes an inauspicious "not-woman" if she cannot give birth to children.

It was shown that in addition to preserving relational persons, the practice of child marriage maintains the *dehātī* ('rural') culture. The confrontation between "urban, corrupted India" and "traditional, good Bhārat" could be seen in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā. The

Hindu nationalist organisation *Raṣṭrīya Svayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), which promotes the Hindu moral law and also (in this locality) supports child marriage, had a strong hold in the area. The RSS had connections to the quarrying industry while the Bhīl formed the majority of the low-paid workforce at the quarries. Thus, the intersection of religious, political and economic factors lead to a favourableness of attitudes towards child marriage on the level of discourse. On the other hand, child marriage was associated with a backward lifestyle that people wanted to distance themselves of – this was done by equating the practice with the Bhīl way of life, and by claiming that the other *jātis* only practice it under severe conditions of poverty. These kinds of statements highlight the different criteria of status currently present more generally in the Indian society. Differences between groups were maintained and strengthened at the discursive level, while disparities were actually decreasing in practice. In the presence of different hierarchies, emphasis was placed on the discourses that best suited people's interests according to the context.

My data shows that bride wealth was increasing in popularity among the lower strata of the society. Bride price, locally known as *carī*, is an established custom among the Bhīl, but in the recent years other *jātis* had also adopted it. The reasons that were offered to explain the resurgence of bride price were gender imbalance and poverty. In this context I discussed the preference for younger brides: according to some informants, the price to be paid of a small girl as bride wealth is smaller because she does not ask for expensive things. The general attitude towards *carī* was that it is merely an economic transaction made in order to secure the maintenance of the bride before she moves in to live with her husband's family in the *gaunā* ceremony. Bride price was strictly contrasted with dowry (*dahej*) which, together with the gift of a virgin (*kanyā dān*), is the major element of Hindu marriage. I demonstrated how dowry was considered to be a matter of *dharma* – in accordance with the immutable law – and how people were therefore of the opinion that it should not be banished. However, it was emphasised that dowry has to be given from one's own free will – only then is it *dhārmik*. In sum, bride wealth, involving transfers of money and considered a custom of the *ādivāsī* and the Scheduled Castes was conceptualised as being against *dharma*, whereas dowry was conceived of as a virtuous deed and an essential part of any marriage. In the context of marriage prestations, demanding and receiving money was judged to be *adhārmik*, against the universal moral law. The things that are given must essentially be *non-monetary gifts*.

The auspicious day of *Akṣaya Tṛtīyā* or *Ākhā Tīj*, as it was known more commonly, was the day when most of the informants had got married. At this time, no astrologer needs to be consulted about the auspicious timing for marriage. As I showed, mass weddings of children were common on *Ākhā Tīj* for various reasons. Firstly, *Ākhā Tīj* takes place after the harvest time and people have more free time. Secondly, it is cheaper to arrange all the marriages during this time, because costs can be shared between the organisers and people will not have time to attend every single wedding. Important kin relations are maintained while extensive feeding and lodging costs are avoided. Thirdly, arranging the marriage of premenarchial girls is believed to accumulate merit, or *punya*. If a father could not afford to arrange his daughter's marriage, this task could be taken up by someone else. The role of the mother's brother was significant in this context, but the person did not necessarily have to belong to one's kin group. Wealthy men could transform their economic resources into spiritual assets by arranging mass weddings of premenarcheal girls. I suggested that this practice can be seen as an ultimate *kanyā dān*, which yields a considerable amount of merit. And not only *punya*, but also *izzat* was gained, as the man's individuality would be long remembered.

So, finally, what does it mean that Indian persons are malleable and that they are simultaneously *dividuals* and *individuals*? How can analysis of child marriage practices contribute to the anthropological study of personhood? Thinking about these questions through my material I suggest two outcomes. Firstly, as members of different generic categories, *jātis*, Indian persons share qualities consisting of physical substance and moral qualities. This is nothing new: it is in accordance with Marriott and Inden's (1977) ethnosociology. However, I contend that villages are another such generic category – this has to be taken into consideration in the analysis of northwest Indian personhood. Relational, *dividual* persons are constructed through ties pertaining not only to the family, the patriline and the *jāti* but also to shared localities. Whereas *dividuality* underscores the significance of sociality, the concepts of fluidity and malleability shed light on why great emphasis is placed on the rules of avoidance. It is precisely because the boundaries of persons and generic categories are conceived of as fluid that the need to regulate the transactions of substances between incompatible categories arises. Child marriage is one of the means to regulate interactions and thus to uphold and enhance individual and group honour.

Secondly, I argue that the Western antinomy between individual and society has to be ignored (see Strathern 1988) in order to understand Indian personhood and sociality. I allege that the autonomous individual is a paradox. Even as an active agent one acts *in the world*, where he or she is dependent on others for the acknowledgement of his or her actions. The actions and physical attributes of persons are judged and valued socially. A person's honour increases only if his civic individuality is deemed positive by others. The public valuations are reflected back into the person and one becomes to know oneself as either an honourable individual or an honourless individual. Thus, I claim that it is sociality that gives rise to individuality and that one only becomes to know oneself in the eyes of others. Thus, every person is a significant other.

In the introduction I stated that this thesis is not about finding ways to eradicate the custom of child marriage. Nevertheless, I feel that something has to be said about the possible practical use of this research. Based on my findings I argue that child marriage cannot be put to an end solely through the prescription of laws or the reinforcement of police actions. Previous research (e.g. Tenhunen 2008; Ghosh 2011) has shown that education significantly raises the age for marriage even if the legal age is not reached. Since nearly all of my informants were illiterate I am unable to say whether or not this is the case in *tahsīl* Bijoliyā. However, villagers saw the education of girls as a factor that would increase the average age for marriage. In fact, all of my informants agreed that education would reduce child marriages and improve the lives of adolescent girls. Government incentives (such as scholarships for school girls), better employment opportunities and awareness campaigns were also thought to contribute positively. Compulsory registration of marriage was, instead, seen as irrelevant. My research results indicate that female education is increasing in the area and that the general attitude towards it is becoming more and more positive – provided that the school is located near one's home and that going there is safe. Even though nearly all of my informants were illiterate, most of them had sent at least one of their children to school. Especially young people emphasised the importance of good education. It also seemed the younger cohort was more often against child marriage or, at least, against early *gaunā*. In addition, younger informants had not been married off as early as members of the previous generation. Thus, it seems that the mean age for marriage is, in fact, slowly increasing.

When I asked Harish, a 35-year-old farmer about what could be done to stop child marriage, he answered: *sangathan hogā samāj mẽ to ruk jāē*, 'if there will be unity in the community, it can stop'. Thus, as obvious as it may sound, a change is needed at the level of general attitudes. Approaching child marriage from a perspective that takes the notion of autonomous individuals for granted will not be fruitful. Social welfare and awareness programmes that take into consideration *the social wholes* and the relational character of Indian personhood are necessary. I believe that anthropological research can play a significant role in this effort. Child marriage cannot be put to an end by directing attention to a certain, externally defined domain, such as economic or caste-based relationships. It is because child marriage corresponds to a basic need of human existence, namely that of female fertility, and because child marriage maintains the shared values on which social life depends that it continues to exist.

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